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Iris Bromige

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GOLDEN SUMMER

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He smoothed the hair back from my forehead and then ran his hand gently over my dress until it came to rest on my waist, and immediately, at his touch, I felt as though I had dropped down a deep well. I could feel his hand through the thin material of my dress with a burning awareness in every nerve of my body. After a tense few moments, he smiled and said lightly,

"Nobody but a cold fish could sit by Killarney on a sunny day with an attractive girl, and not kiss her."

His lips on mine were firm, unhurried. And I felt as helpless as a twig carried over Niagara Falls, shaken, amazed, bewildered by the clamour of senses never experienced before. And with Darrel. Darrel, of all people. A man I had respected but never liked. I must be mad.

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The New Owner
The Enchanted Garden
The Night of the Party
The Bend in the River
The Flowering Year

Golden Summer

Iris Bromige

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Chapter 1

AFTERMATH OF A DISASTER

"A visitor for you, Miss Lansford," said the nurse cheerfully.

My heart died when I saw Darrel Brynton. So the nurse had lied to me about Adrian.

"Only ten minutes. Our patient is still suffering from the effects of shock," said the nurse with an official smile for Darrel as she left.

"Hullo, my dear," he said, pulling forward a chair. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit dazed. Darrel, tell me. Adrian. What's happened? The nurse said his name was not on the casualty list, but I don't believe her. Otherwise, he would have been here. Please tell me the truth."

"Now don't get agitated. Adrian's all right. He escaped with no more than a few bruises."

"Then why hasn't he come?"

"He had to go to Ireland. He's there now."

I looked at Darrel searchingly. His grey eyes met mine. I knew he was an honest man, but he might be sparing me until I was stronger, perhaps under the nurse's instructions.

"You give me your word that that's the truth."

"I give you my word."

"I see. Thank you." The relief was so enormous that I could hardly speak. All the previous day and in the intervals of an uneasy, drugged sleep, I had been half crazy with fear

for Adrian. I looked at Darrel with warm affection for being the bearer of such good tidings, although our relationship was not all that cordial these days.

"You were lucky, too, Jean. Minor burns and concussion. You'll soon be out, I'm sure."

"So am I. Were there many casualties?"

"Fifteen lives lost. Don't talk about it if you'd rather not. You'd better let me arrange for a quiet holiday for you to give you a chance to get over the shock."

"I'll see what Adrian says. I'm getting married in a month's time. Remember?"

"Yes."

I thought he seemed constrained. Bedside platitudes didn't come easily to him, I guessed. In fact, platitudes of any kind were not part of his equipment, which was why he was such an uncomfortable person to have for a trustee. And he had never approved of my engagement to Adrian. He hadn't said as much but I had sensed his objection beneath his cool attitude, and that had widened the gulf between us.

"I can't remember clearly. It's all so confused. And don't be like that nurse and tell me not to try to remember. It's uncertainty that's so worrying. But now I know that Adrian's all right, I shan't worry. I wish I could remember, though."

"You will, when the concussion's worn off."

"Well, you must know what happened. I expect the papers have been full of it, but I haven't seen one yet. I really felt rather awful yesterday. I've been here two days, the nurse says. There was a fire that night. Someone banged on my cabin door. I remember that."

"Don't strain after it. The ship was abandoned, you were in a lifeboat and were picked up by a Belgian boat that landed you in Harwich. And here you are, in a sort of

ante-room they made up as a ward because they were packed out. It's only a small hospital."

"How did you hear?"

"Adrian telephoned me. He'd found out that you were all right. Asked me to keep an eye on you because he had to go to Ireland."

"And he was unhurt?"

"Absolutely. Just stop worrying now, my dear, and get some sleep."

"It was kind of you to come. And thank you for the flowers," I said, and suddenly for no reason at all my eyes filled with tears as I looked at the daffodils. Right deep inside me, there was some kind of hurt, but I couldn't explain it. My mind was confused.

"You're still suffering from the shock. I'll come back tomorrow."

"No. Stay a few minutes longer. You were abroad. When did you get back?"

"On Thursday."

"And when did it happen?" I asked, still straining after a clear picture.

"Friday night. Adrian telephoned me on Saturday. And today's Monday. The nurse said there was no point in coming to see you before because you were concussed and under sedation, but you've nothing to worry about. Are the burns painful?" he asked, looking at my bandaged arm.

"What? No, not very. Did Adrian say when he'd be back?"

But the nurse had appeared with something in a glass and Darrel patted my hand and said gently, "Relax. Get some sleep. I'll come back tomorrow."

He turned at the door and gave me a little salute. I was sorry to see him go. Although we often got across each

other, he was a reassuring person to have around just then, when I felt lonely in an alien world. And I did not take to this nurse with her too-bright manner, her hard hands and her little glasses of goodness-knows-what that made my mind seem like cotton wool. She treated me like a baby to be humoured.

I began to feel better that afternoon, and things were getting clearer, but something was still eluding me. I caught a glimpse of it, like a shadow on a wall that kept appearing and vanishing in fitful sunshine. I lay watching half a sycamore tree which was all I could see through the window. The buds were swelling and showing green. March. And on the third of April I was going to marry Adrian. My shoulder was hurting me now and I shifted in the bed to ease it. The burn on the lower part of my arm was no longer painful, but my head still ached.

That evening, I poured the nurse's offering into the vase of daffodils after the first sip, while she was talking to the doctor outside. I hoped they wouldn't arouse her suspicions by immediately dying, but all was well. And when I was left for the night, I went back over the events that had led me here, carefully, like a child intent on learning to walk. I had to get it clear.

Adrian had a business appointment in Sweden. I had always wanted to see Stockholm and we arranged to go for the weekend prior to the business appointment. We had caught the boat at midday on Friday. It was coming back now. A roughish sea and I hadn't felt too well. Adrian had met an acquaintance on board. A girl who had once worked for his firm, but I couldn't remember her name. I'd had to retire to my cabin early that afternoon, furious with myself, for I had always considered myself a good sailor. I remembered I had no dinner that evening. Just a tonic water and a

biscuit which Adrian brought to my cabin on a tray. It was the time sequence I couldn't seem to get clear. How long afterwards was it when I heard the banging on my door? Then smoke, bells ringing, a crowd struggling up some stairs, and I could remember no more except shivering in a boat, then climbing up what seemed like a mountain on a swaying rope-ladder. And after that, nothing at all until I had woken up in this little room. Then the awful panic about Adrian. But something was missing. I was sure something was missing.

I fell asleep still trying to tease it out. When Darrel came the next afternoon I was feeling almost myself again, and determined to leave the hospital and get back to my flat.

"The doctor says tomorrow," said Darrel. "And recommends a quiet rest. The arm will need attention for a bit."

"I feel well enough to leave today."

"Maybe. I'll come for you tomorrow and drive you home. Can your landlady look after you?"

"Mrs. Grey's a dear. She'll be more than willing if I need any help, but I shan't, I'm sure. I still can't remember clearly, though. My memory's patchy."

"Shock can cause a degree of amnesia. I shouldn't worry about that."

"You haven't heard from Adrian?"

"No."

"Nor have I. I can't understand it. He *is* all right, Darrel, isn't he?"

"I've said so. When he telephoned me on Saturday, he was just off to Heathrow to catch a plane to Dublin."

"But his firm would never have asked him to go on a Saturday immediately after a disaster like that, even if he did escape unhurt. And anyway, he was due in Stockholm on Monday."

"He didn't say it was business. Just that he had to go to Ireland and would be writing to you. It's only Tuesday today. Barely time for you to get a letter, after all. Stop worrying."

"All right. Isn't it tantalising, though, when there's something you can't remember, and yet you know it's there in your mind somewhere?"

"It'll probably come when you're least expecting it."

"You know, I'm quite well enough to go home today. I don't feel inclined to stay here until tomorrow. They must need the bed."

"Now I can see you're getting back to form. I'll bring the car tomorrow."

I looked at him. His calm manner had often infuriated me because it was so deceptive; there would be no budging him. As a face, it was rather impressive. Crisp black hair, dark-skinned, dark grey eyes and reasonably good features. But it was a face I had never found easy to read, and for some undefined reason it always put me on my guard. In spite of all the pinpricks he inflicted, though, I had reason to be grateful to him for it was he who had introduced me to Adrian, his cousin. And although it was probably as tiresome a task for him as it was irksome to me, he discharged his duties as trustee with scrupulous care and it was not his fault that my father had saddled him with this task. He was so unlike Adrian in every way. There was not one single family likeness, unless you counted a certain kind of elegance of movement which they both possessed. Adrian was of slighter build and not so tall, fair as Darrel was dark, with a volatile face and a lively nature that had made the world an entirely different place from the moment I met him. And I wanted the reassurance of a letter from him more than anything else in the world.

"I don't want to bother you to come all this way, Darrel. I can easily get a train to London and a taxi from there."

"You'll feel different when you get up."

"I did get up for an hour this morning."

"And how did you feel?"

"Wuzzy, but not too bad."

"I'll fetch you tomorrow. Don't be an ass. You know you're not up to that journey by public transport. And what's the hurry?"

"I have a feeling there's a letter from Adrian waiting for me."

"There isn't. I called in this morning."

"Oh. Thank you. That was kind of you, Darrel. For such a busy person, you're spending an awful lot of time on my affairs. Are you still on leave?"

"You could put it like that. There's been an unexpected hold-up on the legal side of the purchase of the site for the new Horticultural Station and it looks as though it will be autumn before we can get completion. We'd finished work on the plans before I went to Nepal and I'd hoped to get started straight away on my return, but as it is I shall probably spend the summer writing up the Nepal expedition. Not much point in my going back to the old Station, because I tied everything up there, as far as I'm concerned, before I left for Nepal."

I nodded, my thoughts still half occupied with Adrian. Surely he would have found time to write by now.

"Well, that's settled, then," said Darrel briskly. "I'll make an early start and be here about ten tomorrow morning."

"Thank you. Thank you very much, Darrel. I'm afraid I'm being an awful nuisance, letting you in for all this. Not having any relatives makes things awkward at a time like this."

He stood looking down at me with an odd expression on his face.

"You're too apt to think of yourself as a nuisance, my dear. Legacy of your home life, I suppose. I'm too relieved that you escaped from that disaster without any serious injury to mind a few drives across Essex. And anyway, I'm a reasonably free man at present."

"And that's a record." I hesitated. It wasn't easy to apologise to Darrel. "I know I often jib, but I do appreciate your kindness now, Darrel."

"Say no more. Just look after yourself. That's a nasty bruise on your forehead."

"I know. I don't know where that came from. I wish I could remember more clearly. I might have someone to thank for my life, for all I know."

"There was no panic, I'm told. The ship's officers and crew got most of the passengers away in the boats in a fairly orderly fashion. The casualties, crew and passengers, were those trapped below decks in the stern where the fire started. I had it from one of the ship's officers who was visiting some of the crew in the casualty ward. Now I should try to forget it."

"I suppose you didn't think to telephone Rawley and Rivers?"

"Yes. When I got back yesterday. I said I didn't think you'd be back for some time, but you'd be in touch with them soon. All good wishes, etc., and not to worry."

"You think of everything, Darrel. Thanks again," I said, smiling weakly.

"You may find I've fallen down on that," he said, nodding at the suitcase he had brought with some clothes for me. "Mrs. Grey was chattering about the disaster all the time she was cramming things into the case, and I fear the

worst. Fortunately, you're a neat person in your habits, from what I could see."

"I have to be in my flatlet. There's not a square inch to spare."

"Until tomorrow, then. Glad you're looking so much better."

Alone again, my thoughts returned to Adrian. I was sure a letter would be waiting for me tomorrow. I found it hard to wait even another day, although I was surprised again by the weakness of my legs when I got up for a couple of hours that evening. There was so much to do before our wedding. I still had some curtain material to buy for the furnished flat we had found quite near my own in Wimbledon, for I couldn't stand the yellow and purple monstrosities there now. But otherwise it was a pleasant flat and I was glad we were going to have Wimbledon Common and Richmond Park near us still. We had spent so much of our free time there during the past year, and it was in Richmond Park that Adrian had asked me to marry him, for which reason I should always feel a warm attachment to it. Thinking of all that had to be done in the next four weeks, I stopped trying to chase that elusive shadow.

Chapter 2

THE SHADOWED PAST

There was no letter. I tried to hide my disappointment from Darrel, assured him that I was feeling fine and pointed to the nice little cold lunch that Mrs. Grey had set out for me in the dining alcove of my living-room as proof that I should not lack help if needed. He refused my invitation to share the lunch as he had an appointment to keep.

I was not sorry to find myself alone in my own room again. I managed to finish most of the ham and all of the salad, and enjoyed the stewed apples and junket. I had eaten hardly anything in the hospital, and felt better for the food. Then I sat in front of the electric fire with a cup of coffee. My shoulder was less painful although I was still conscious of a headache in the background. I didn't think I should lose it until I'd unravelled what now was beginning to seem a mystery. Where was Adrian? Why hadn't he written?

Perhaps the journey had tired me more than I thought, for while I was still worrying at the mystery, I fell asleep. I woke up as the clock was striking four, my mind quite clear, and I remembered everything. I could see it like a film on a cinema screen unfolding before my eyes. The dash to Adrian's cabin, to find it empty. Rushing back to see him with his arm round the girl we had met on the deck, helping her up the stairs in the middle of a heaving throng. The incessant clanging of a bell, and the acrid smell of smoke. I seized a coat and my handbag from my cabin and followed

them. The heat from flames at the stern of the ship hit me like a blast from a furnace. I could see Adrian's fair head bobbing along ahead of me. I fought to reach him and came up to the deck a few yards behind him. I remembered shouting his name but he didn't seem to hear me amid the noise and confusion. Then I managed to reach them and caught his arm. He shrugged it off without looking, and swept the girl closer to him as the crowd pressed in on us, and I heard him say, "Hold on to me, Deirdre. You'll be all right, my love." I called his name as the crowd threatened to sweep me from him and he half turned his head, but in the light from a swaying deck lamp it was hard to see his expression, and before I could tell whether he knew I was there or not, he had turned back to the girl, protecting her from the crowd and thrusting forward towards one of the lifeboats into which an officer was shepherding the people as he shouted out orders, keeping them moving in a fairly steady progression. The old familiar chill of rejection had stopped me for a moment, and I allowed myself to be swept along to the right towards another lifeboat. I remembered feeling numb and just going with the crowd until I fetched up against a stanchion with some force, and it was this that must have caused the concussion. Then the film became dimmer. I remembered the strong arm of a sailor, the pitching boat, the awful climb up the rope-ladder of the ship that picked us up.

And now the shadow was explained. Had my subconscious refused to let me remember before, as a defence? I sat there for some time, submerged in a feeling of desolation as cold as the North Sea whose clutches we had escaped. I tried to tell myself that Adrian hadn't seen me; that the girl might have been feeling ill and needed help; that he might have spoken those words in a desperate effort to rally a panic-

stricken girl. It was no use. In the last resort, Adrian had neither known nor cared what was happening to me in his concern for the other girl whom he had introduced as a casual acquaintance. He had at least stopped to find out afterwards what had happened to me, but that was small consolation in view of his absence and silence since. And I was the girl he was engaged to marry in four weeks' time.

When I had recovered myself a little, I telephoned his firm and discovered that Adrian was not away on business. He had been given a week's leave of absence in view of his ordeal and was expected back at the office next Monday. It was his typist I spoke to and she seemed a friendly, talkative girl, full of the disaster. While she talked, I racked my brain for the surname of the girl. Deirdre . . . A short surname. I had it. Lome or Lone.

"By the way," I said, "do you by any chance happen to know the address of a Miss Deirdre Lome? She used to work for your firm. She was on board, too, and I'd like to find out how she is."

"Deirdre Lome? It doesn't ring a bell. Half a minute. I'll find out. Lome, you said?"

"Yes. Or it might be Lone."

She came back after a few minutes.

"Sorry. No trace. How long since she was with us?"

"Two years or so, I believe," I said, knowing that Adrian had only been with the firm that length of time.

"Hang on. I'll try again."

But when she came back, it was only to repeat that they had no record of a Miss Lome, and I apologised for troubling her and rang off.

By the end of the week, my burns had ceased to trouble me very much, my headache had gone, and I was feeling so much better that I was able to push all those tormenting

questions into the background until I saw Adrian again. It must have been the result of strain and shock that had caused me to doubt his love. I felt rather ashamed of myself, and knew that there would be a quite rational explanation when Adrian arrived back this weekend. He had probably written and the letter had gone astray, or, knowing that he would be back this weekend, he might have waited to tell me. In the year of our engagement, his love and care had never faltered, and I knew he was as honest as the day. To be so thrown by a few puzzles seemed to me inexcusably disloyal, and I had scolded myself into a reasonably optimistic frame of mind by Saturday morning. Adrian was due back at the office on Monday. I should be seeing him today or tomorrow. And all would be explained.

I was just clearing away my breakfast things when I heard the door knocker downstairs and flew out to the landing. It was Darrel's voice talking to Mrs. Grey. It was rather dark on the stairs and it was not until he came into my room that I saw his face clearly and knew something was wrong. My eyes searched his. I think I knew then.

"I've bad news, Jean. Adrian was killed in a car accident in Ireland yesterday. I heard late last night. I'm flying out this morning."

"How?" I was surprised to hear my voice so calm.

"On a mountain pass. A thick mist. He went off the road at a bend. I'll be able to tell you more when I get back. Here, sit down. Can I get you a drink?"

I shook my head. I think that in my subconscious mind a sense of impending doom had been lurking ever since I came round in that hospital room, and I had been fighting to keep it down there out of sight. Now I met it with a kind of fatalistic despair.

"I'll be all right, Darrel. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, my dear," he said gently. "I'll see to everything. I must go now. My plane leaves at eleven."

When he had gone, I just sat on the window seat looking out of the window, seeing nothing out there, only the past and Adrian's lively face and alert young body. It just didn't seem possible that it was now all finished. That Adrian had gone from me for ever.

* * *

When I saw Darrel on his return, he looked grey with fatigue and was in a grim, taciturn mood. His hand was bandaged.

"A knife slipped," he said, in answer to my query. "It's nothing."

"Did you find out what Adrian was doing in Ireland?"

He shrugged his shoulders wearily.

"Spent a couple of days in Dublin. Then hired a car and went off to the west coast."

"But why?" I asked despairingly. "Why?"

"Why not? He'd had an ordeal on that boat, the firm had given him a week's leave. He probably felt a short spell in Ireland would do him good."

Darrel's expression did not invite questions, and I decided that it would be pointless now to mention Deirdre Lome. The name would mean nothing to him, and it would merely sound petty and disloyal to bring it up now. And it was no longer relevant, anyway. Darrel's dry tone had seemed to imply that just because I was engaged to Adrian, I didn't have the right to keep him chained to my side or the right to question all his movements. Possessiveness was something I knew he disliked. But there was much in me which I feared Darrel disliked. He had thought well of Adrian. The reservations which I had sensed in him where our engage-

ment was concerned must have been reservations about me, not Adrian. I was not a good choice for a wife; Adrian deserved better. To be fair, I supposed I had never shown myself in my best light to Darrel because I had always jibbed against his authority over my affairs. And it was my father who had shown so little respect for my common sense that he had appointed Darrel as trustee for me. Hurt pride, I thought, was a sorry counsellor, and in face of recent events, a shallow, foolish fault. So I said nothing about Deirdre Lome.

Darrel, as Adrian's next of kin, saw to all the formalities and sustained me with a kind of austere kindness over the next week or two, but as the first effects of despair and desolation wore off, the questions returned to torment me. And I knew that I should never have any peace of mind until I had found out the answers. They might be irrelevant now. Adrian was lost to me. But he and I had been as close as any two people could be. We had no secrets from each other. I had known his heart as well as my own, I had thought. And the events of the last week of his life made no sense at all to me. I had to find out the truth. The random questions I asked Darrel in the hope of gaining some light were fruitless. It was quite clear to him that Adrian had used the unexpected bonus of a week's leave to spend the time in Ireland, knowing that I was being looked after and was not seriously hurt.

"He loved Ireland, as you know. Our two families always spent the summer holidays there when we were kids. He must have told you. And we went back together quite often. It was an obvious choice for a quiet week after that experience."

"Where was it? The accident."

"A mountain pass in Connemara."

"He was a good driver, Darrel."

"A narrow, dangerous road in that sort of weather. Thick mist, they said. And in a hired car he wasn't familiar with. Don't keep going over it, Jean. You must accept it and try to come to terms with it. I know it's hard, but it will only be harder if you keep reliving it."

His voice was grim. He was standing by the window of my flat, looking out, his back to me. I could understand his attitude. He knew nothing of that shadowy third person who had been with us on the boat and who was haunting me. He had been very fond of Adrian, and their friendship went back to their childhood. My questions probed his wound, too, and must seem morbidly insensitive. He obviously could not help me find the answers to those questions, and I decided then to make no more approaches to him.

But day and night those questions tormented me. My work suffered, I could not discipline my mind to concentrate on anything. And early in April, four weeks after Adrian's death, when the day that was to have been our wedding day dawned fair and bright, I came to my decision. If the answers to those questions lay anywhere, they lay in Ireland.

I telephoned Darrel at the hotel where he was staying and asked him if he would come round to coffee that evening. I refused his suggestion that I went there to dinner instead. I wanted to do battle on my own ground. I took particular care over the coffee, and he congratulated me on it as he looked at me over his coffee cup with that speculative air which always threatened my prepared strategies.

"Well out with it," he said calmly.

That radar equipment in his mind never failed to give him the warning, I thought. But I had prepared my case carefully, concealing the points which would definitely put him off, marshalling those most likely to strike a sympath-

etic chord. First the main fact. It always paid to come to the point quickly with Darrel. Then the supporting case.

"I want you to advance me two hundred and fifty pounds from my father's legacy, please, Darrel. I've decided to spend the summer in Ireland."

"Why?"

"For several reasons. In the first place, my doctor advised me to get right away for a complete break and change of scene when I admitted I wasn't sleeping. That was the last time I had my shoulder dressed. I didn't think of doing anything about it then, but I'm still not sleeping well and my work is suffering. Adrian told me a lot about Ireland. I'd hoped to go there with him one day. It sounded such a beautiful country. I can't carry on as I am. It's not fair to my employers, and I feel I shall crack up if I don't make some effort to pull out of it." My voice quavered, and I wasn't acting, but one little corner of my mind said it might help.

"Ireland's certainly a good choice if you're in search of peace and quiet, and after the shocks you've had recently, I'm not surprised that you feel you must get away. But in your case, is Ireland the right choice? Isn't it going to be a reminder?"

"Adrian loved it. His enthusiasm infected me. I just feel I shall find peace of mind there."

"I see." He was looking at me searchingly. "What exactly have you in mind? Touring round? Staying in one place?"

"No definite plans. Just finding a place that suits me, I guess. I reckon that two hundred and fifty pounds will cover my board and lodging for the summer. I've enough saved up for my fare and other expenses."

"Wouldn't a cruise be a better idea?"

"Not for me."

"I think it would. This visit to Ireland will be a kind of sentimental pilgrimage for you. You'll go and see the scene of the accident, brood all the time over what might have been, and get in a thoroughly morbid state. Ireland's a wonderful country in which to indulge melancholy thoughts. You need company and activity, not solitude and beautiful landscape and the sort of tragic romanticism that is part of Ireland's magic but not what you're needing just now."

"How do you know what I need?"

"You're looking like a ghost and are obviously whacked out, and I doubt if your mind's in a state to decide wisely. I can understand why you feel drawn to Ireland. But leave it, Jean. Leave it for some years, and then go there when it's all healed. Now, it would just be morbidity, and the last place to find a cure for heartbreak. I suggest a short cruise, and a change of job. A long holiday without any occupation for your mind but memories and mourning will be as much help to you as a widow's weeds."

"So you won't let me have the money?"

"No. My instructions from your father were to look after the money until you were twenty-five unless any emergency arose which in my opinion warranted an advance. I should be doing you a disservice if I helped you go forward with this scheme. A cruise, any other part of the world, and I'll think again, but this is a bad time to sell shares. The market's depressed and you'd do badly out of it."

"I don't care about markets and how much money I get."

"I know. That's why your father put it in my care."

"I've given in my notice to my firm and I shall go, whatever you say. I'll get a job over there."

"I doubt it. You forget, there aren't enough jobs to go round in Ireland. There's one possibility, if you're so set on going."

He was silent as he finished his coffee, and I said impatiently, "Well?"

"As you know, I'm marking time this summer until I can get on with my new appointment in the autumn, and I don't intend to spend it in a London hotel. I gave up my flat when I went on this expedition to India, expecting to move in on the job when I got back. I shall spend the summer writing up the expedition, and as it happens I've just made arrangements to go to Ireland myself to do it. To a hotel I know well. If you'd like to come as my secretary, and type the script and the correspondence that's bound to pile up about the new project, I'll pay your hotel expenses. It'll only amount to a half-time job, but it will give you an occupation and meet your expenses."

"And you'll be there to keep an eye on me and stop me getting morbid," I said with a dryness that matched his.

"Precisely. And I shall get my typing done. That's the best I can offer. Is it a deal?"

I hesitated. Then, as it seemed the only way of getting to Ireland for a prolonged stay, I said coolly, "I should have preferred to go independently, but I'll give it a trial if it's understood that I'm free to go off on my own exploring the country when I'm not working, with no questions asked or directions given. I'm twenty-four, Darrel, not fourteen. And it's time you stopped treating me like a child."

"Point taken," he said, with a gleam in his eyes. "I'll telephone Michael tonight and book another room. He's letting me have a separate small room for working in, so it should be quite cosy."

"Very," I said ironically.

"As a matter of fact, I think you'll like it. A comfortable little hotel, good food, wonderful country. In West Cork. Michael and Molly are both good friends of mine."

"Has Adrian ever stayed there?"

"No. The family holidays were all spent in Kerry, a bit further north. When Adrian and I came back in later years, we used to tour around. By the way, I've booked a passage for myself and car from Fishguard to Rosslare on the fifteenth of May. Will that suit you, and do you mind the sea crossing in view of your recent experience? It's only three hours."

"I'd sooner go by sea than fly, anyway. I leave my job the week before, so that will fit in with your date."

"Good. I'll book your passage."

"If it doesn't work out and we get under each other's skin too much, Darrel, I shall leave you to your work and just go off on my own until my money runs out. We've not worked too harmoniously together before."

"Haven't we? Well, harmony's not everything. There was about as much harmony between my director and me as there is in Schoenberg's music, but we did some good work together."

"And now, instead of being second-in-command, you'll be the director of the new Station. Let us hope your second-in-command realises there's not going to be any command about his part."

"Prickly as a hedgehog with me, aren't you? As a matter of fact, he's an exceptionally able chap and I'm lucky to get him. Why are you so warm and generous by nature to everybody else and so prickly with me? I didn't ask for the responsibility of looking after your small inheritance, you know. Your father thrust it on me."

"I know. And a very tiresome chore it's been for you."

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to. I'm not that obtuse. And if I needed any confirmation of your opinion of me, I got it from your

attitude to my engagement to Adrian. You thought he'd made a pretty poor choice, didn't you?"

"You really believe that?"

"The chilly response was pretty evident, Darrel, and I know you thought a lot of Adrian."

"Yes. And of you, Jean. And I'm sorry if my attitude gave you the wrong idea. Knowing you both, I admit that I didn't feel that it was altogether a suitable match." He was picking his words carefully. "I thought that you were a little immature. But I was probably quite wrong, and my reservations, anyway, were no more than I'd feel about any plunge into the dangerous seas of matrimony," he concluded drily.

"We loved each other and were always happy together," I said fiercely, pushing that shadow away.

"Yes, I'm sure you were. I've been away and not seen much of either of you for the past year, remember. And I don't mean to seem heartless. Sometimes, though, softness is a mistake. Just now, I think it's no help to you."

I blinked back the sudden treacherous tears. He was quite right. Softness only undermined my composure.

"I'm sorry, Darrel. Let's not squabble. You've been very kind these past weeks. I know I must be a nuisance to you. You've a busy life of your own to live, after all."

He put down his coffee cup with a vigour that threatened the china.

"I like your honesty and warmth and spirit, Jean; I can bear with your self-willed obstinacy; but what I cannot stand is this abject 'I must be a nuisance' stuff. If you say that once more to me, I won't be answerable for the consequences. I suppose it's a hangover from your relationship with your father, but it has no place between us. Is that understood, once and for all?"

"Yes."

"Well, we've achieved something this evening, then. You can pour me another cup of coffee now."

I did so, not certain whether I was victor or vanquished, which uncertainty was not rare in my encounters with Darrel. But at least I had got my way about spending the summer in Ireland, even if not in the fashion I'd envisaged

Chapter 3

GREEN AND GOLD

Now that I had a definite objective and much to do in helping my successor take over my job, clearing out my flat, which I was giving up, and preparing for the summer in Ireland, I found my mind responded and I was in control of it again. I pared my possessions down to what I would need for the summer with the exception of a caseful of books and personal treasures which Mrs. Grey had offered to keep for me.

"I'm right sorry to lose you, my dear," she said to me on the day before I was leaving, "and if you want to come back, I'll find a way. I shall only let the flat on a short-term basis. So you just let me know."

I promised that I would, but as I finished my packing I had a feeling that I should never come back, that this was a turning point in my life. Now that the first effects of grief and shock were wearing off, I found myself in an odd, detached frame of mind which crystallised that evening when I sat at my dressing-table looking at a snapshot that had slipped out of my notecase. It had been taken by a friend in the riverside garden of an inn near Henley on the day after our engagement. Adrian and I were arm-in-arm, laughing. I felt that I was looking at two strangers. A good-looking young man in a blazer, a glass of beer in his hand, happy and confident; the girl beside him, hair blowing in the wind, wearing a white sheath dress with a scarf

tucked in at the neck.

I put the snapshot down and looked at myself in the mirror. The gulf that separated me from the girl in the snapshot seemed unbridgeable, and the face in the mirror reflected it. Thinner, with cheekbones more prominent; dark shadows under the eyes; the vitality missing. But inside, the difference was even greater, for I had stopped being the girl in the snapshot, and the new Jean Lansford I had yet to find. Just now I was lost, mistrusting my own judgment.

I had thought I knew Adrian as well as I knew my own heart, but he had turned into a stranger the last time I saw him. I had been so overwhelmingly grateful to him for loving me, but in the end I hadn't really counted. I thought of Darrel's anger when I had apologised for being a nuisance. Perhaps that was why Adrian's love had seemed such a miracle, for in my home I had always been a nuisance.

In my present detached mood, I looked back at the old Jean Lansford in a kind of summing-up. Only child of Thea Lansford, famous opera singer whose career filled her life and took her all over the world, and Stephen Lansford, scientist. Child an irrelevant intrusion on their work. Brought up first by an elderly aunt, then various paid employees until of an age to look after self and father. Home, a house in Surrey village near Horticultural Station where father worked. Very proud of such gifted parents, but own world lonely and chilly, and parents not even interested in her pride in them. After death of father, took up secretarial work in London publishing firm, promoted to editorial work. At twenty-five will inherit legacy from father, now in the hands of trustee, Darrel Brynton. Became engaged to Adrian Brynton, Darrel's cousin, deceased.

Little pictures of the past came into my mind. My mother's infrequent visits home, so much looked forward to,

so brief. She was beautiful and gay and as far from me as the stars in the sky. My father, kind in his vague way, eating his food at our silent meals, not knowing what he was eating, not hearing any remark I might make, or if he heard, merely responding with a nod or a kind of grunt. The silent drives to the Horticultural Station every morning, for he could never be bothered with driving a car and I was his driver. His bent, shuffling walk up the drive of the Horticultural Station when he was getting old and was officially retired on a pension, but still went on with his work there. Virology was so much more important to him than human beings that in the end our relationship had become almost farcical. It was fitting that he had died in the research laboratory, at his work, quite suddenly. It was the way he would have chosen to die.

And so Adrian had come into my life like a warm sun. Had I been too eager to find love? Had that blinded me? Or was I even now misjudging Adrian? We were going to be married, after all. We had always been happy together. Then why? If I hadn't been sea-sick on that voyage, I might have learned more about Deirdre, seen Adrian's reaction more clearly. The meeting had seemed so casual then. As though it was no more than a surprising encounter with an acquaintance almost forgotten. I did remember the haunting beauty of her face: white skin, cloudy dark hair, dark blue eyes, soft Irish voice.

And so, there was the old Jean Lansford, whose life had come to a halt in the North Sea on a boat that had caught fire. All that remained was a hollow ache and tormenting questions. And the new Jean Lansford? I did not know, but she had finished going round with her begging bowl for love.

Impatiently, because I had been trying to stop these introspective moods, I put the snapshot back in my notecase

and finished my packing. I had pulled myself together. I was going to a country which had drawn me ever since Adrian had told me about it. The blazing gold of the gorse, the fuchsia hedges of Kerry, the sandy coves of Dingle: I remembered him describing these with that gay enthusiasm of his that was so infectious, but when I had suggested that we went there for a holiday, he had said, "Let's go to the sun, Jeanie; there's too much soft weather in Ireland," and we had gone to Spain. Now I should see it for myself, and perhaps find the answers to those questions, and put together the pieces of the old Jean Lansford into a new version. I could wish I had not to do it under the cool, laconic eyes of Darrel Brynton, though.

* * *

We drove across an almost deserted London in the early hours of the morning to Olympia where the car ferry started. With the car loaded, we had breakfast on the train which started just as we reached the toast and marmalade stage. It was a comfortable journey to Fishguard, with only two other people in our carriage. Darrel read most of the time. Looking at him, opposite me, I could not help wondering how this ill-assorted team would work out. I had known him for eight years, ever since my father had taken to inviting his most promising young assistant home to continue their scientific discussions. To my father, Darrel had been just a keen brain on his own wavelength. He had been disappointed when Darrel had opted for the wider field of ecology and had passed out of his department, but he had remained the only person ever invited to our house by my father. At sixteen, when I had first met him, he had intimidated me with his dark brooding looks, the nine years between us seeming to put us in different generations. Since

then, I had wavered between friendship and hostility. Now, in my new-found detachment, I felt better able to handle him, but I could foresee some rough passages.

The boat sailed from Fishguard on that sunny afternoon in May on a sea of such pearly calm that it might have been a lake. It carried only a modest number of passengers and the three-hour trip to Rosslare gave every indication of being a pleasant one, I thought, as I leaned on the rail and watched Fishguard recede. Darrel had gone for a walk round the boat, but I was content to stay there in the sun, watching the gulls hovering and swooping above, eyes sharp for any scraps of food that might be available, their white wings beautifully curved against the blue of the sky. A girl's laugh nearby drew my eyes away. It was such a gay laugh. I turned to meet the appraising eyes of a fair-haired young man leaning elegantly against the rail between me and the girl. He was what in older days would have been termed a dandy, I supposed, but in these days of casual dressing to the point of being tramp-like, such fastidious taste was a pleasant change. The grey raglan check coat, the lavender and grey scarf, the highly polished shoes, seemed to belong to a more sophisticated setting than this boat-deck.

"You're not listening, Nick," said the girl beside him. "It was really funny."

"I'm sure it was," he drawled.

"How can you be so calm and unaffected at the start of a marvellous holiday? A whole summer in magical Ireland, and you're about as excited as a limpet."

"For all you know, a limpet may be seething with excitement under that shell, delirious with joy as it embraces its rock."

"You're hopeless," said the girl, laughing again.

"And you're too excitable by half. So exhausting. When

you expect so much, you're bound to be disappointed."

"But I shall have had all the fun of looking forward. Just think. A whole new country. And I've always thought Ireland such a romantic place. Imagine being able to ride every day in beautiful wild country, with mountains and rivers, and even along lanes without fear of being run down by a beastly car."

"I assume you're willing to be driven to your destination in my beastly car."

"Oh, they're a necessary evil sometimes."

"Logic is not your strong point, Tonie."

"No, but honestly, Nick, aren't you a little tiny bit thrilled by the prospect of a summer in Ireland?"

"I'm quite looking forward to it, yes. I'm past the age for thrills, my child."

"Old, old man."

"Ten years older than you, anyway. And I fancy I was born older than you."

There was a pause, and then the clear voice of the girl went on:

"Did you mind being saddled with me for the journey? It was quite ridiculous, Mummy thinking I couldn't come on my own. I mean to say, at eighteen. But you know what the family's like. And Grandma still thinks in terms of chaperones. And as Uncle Roger had invited us both . . ."

Her voice trailed away, and I saw the young man glance down at the girl with a whimsical expression.

"My dear Tonie, I'm delighted to have your lively company, and if I've given you any other impression, it's wrong and my manners are at fault," he said with the deliberate formality of a bygone age.

"Never," she replied mischievously. "Your airs and graces are always enjoyable. But I expect you've been thinking

about your new book behind all my chattering."

"Could be. Books are apt to be obsessive."

"It's exciting, having a writer in the family, though I must say I think you might have written about something more appealing than Victorian poets. When is it coming out?"

"In the autumn."

"Will it be a bestseller and make you awfully rich?"

"Such innocence! One hopes the publisher won't be out of pocket."

"I'm sure it will be a great success."

"Nice Tonie. I'm going in search of a cup of tea. Coming?"

"Waste time drinking tea in that stuffy lounge? Not I."

"Right. See you later."

When he had gone, I looked at the girl with some interest, warmed by the vitality that bubbled out of her. She had a mane of red-gold hair, clipped carelessly back so that it moved in the soft breeze like a flame, the long fringe just clearing her eyebrows. Her skin was faintly freckled and she had a wide mouth and fine white teeth. Not pretty or good-looking, she had a vividness that more than compensated for either. She was of fair height, slender and coltish, and was wearing a navy-blue duffel-coat opened to reveal a primrose-coloured cotton shirt over a navy skirt. Her body was curved over the rail as she watched the bow wave of the ship, until suddenly she walked off towards the stern, her bright hair visible all along the deck until she was hidden by the mid-ship structure.

Darrel joined me soon after and we stayed chatting there until we went in search of tea, and I did not see the young couple again until we were driving off the quay at Rosslare, when I saw the fair head and the red head in an open M.G.

ahead of us.

Looking around with some interest at my first view of Ireland, I was surprised at the quietness of this little place with its green cliffs, small scatter of white stone cottages and one large hotel facing us a stone's throw away.

"I'd expected a busy port. Isn't this pleasant?"

"No port. Just the terminus of the steamer route. The seaside resort of Rosslare is a few miles north. But Ireland doesn't go in for noise and bustle, anyway."

We were staying the night at the hotel so that we could get an early start in the morning for the drive to the south-west. The M.G. had disappeared, moving fast along the main road. I wondered where they were going, then dismissed them as Darrel drew up at the hotel entrance and unlocked the boot for our overnight cases. He might be a boffin, I thought, as he strode ahead of me with the cases and made for the reception desk with a brisk air, but there was nothing of the vagueness, the air of being elsewhere, which I associated with scientists, judging them all by my father. Darrel was very much there, in charge, his dark assessing eyes missing nothing, not even the change inside me, as I realised when he observed over our after-dinner coffee,

"You've grown a protective shell, Jean. Overdue, perhaps."

"That's what I think."

"Sleeping better?"

"Much, thank you."

He gave me a sharp look, then produced a map and showed me the route for the next day's motoring.

My first experience of the Irish countryside on that day's drive from south-east to south-west with Darrel was one which I knew I should never forget. The quiet winding

roads, the gorse glowing gold against emerald green grass, mountains always in view, meadows full of wild flowers, the smooth flowing rivers. And over all, the freshness of early summer and a golden light which entranced me.

Darrel drove fast and competently, giving me no qualms, only the feeling that I should have liked to drive more slowly through such lovely country and linger a while, but we had a long way to go and to linger was not practical.

"Is it what you expected?" he asked towards midday, when we were travelling through Tipperary.

"Even lovelier. I hadn't expected so many ranges of mountains, or imagined such beautiful rivers."

"Seldom out of sight of either in Ireland."

"And I've never seen such magnificent trees lining a river. Just look at that chestnut covered in bloom, and those copper beeches."

We had slowed to a walking pace behind some cows being driven along by a small boy and an inefficient dog.

"Looks as though they've some way to go. Perhaps you'd like to stop here and walk down to the river."

He drew up on the grass verge and we walked along a track which led to a low stone bridge spanning the river. We leaned on it and looked along the twisting river course. It ran over a gravel bed which glinted gold through the green weed streaming in the flow. Giant trees, chestnuts, beech, willows, adorned its banks and trailed branches over the water, which was crystal clear. There were hawthorns in bloom, too, and a meadow of buttercups could be seen through the trees, and cows grazing.

"Look, there's a trout," said Darrel. "Just this side of the far stone support."

"And another. A whole lot," I said, leaning over further. "A fisherman's paradise. Does fishing appeal to you?"

"Only the setting."

In the sunshine, the water looked gold. Green and gold. That was my first impression of Ireland. The new green of the trees, the emerald green of the grass, the gold of gorse and buttercups and river bed. There was no sound but the rippling of the water. I was caught up in the timeless peace and beauty of the scene, and Darrel must have been, too, for we stayed there without talking for quite a while, until he roused himself and said,

"Those cows must have reached their home meadow by now. We'd better be moving if we want to find a hotel for lunch."

After lunch we drove through country less pastoral, more mountainous, and I ran out of words of praise, and just drank it in. We made one more stop at the summit of a mountain pass from which the view covered a large part of central Ireland, basking below us in the sunshine.

"I've never seen this view on a clear day before," said Darrel. "It's always been soft weather."

I remembered Adrian's words. I wished we had come here for that holiday and that he had shown me this beautiful country in those golden days of my innocence. I wouldn't have minded the soft weather.

Then we were nosing down the hairpin bends and were away. We reached our destination, a village on an inlet of the south-west coast of Cork, soon after four that afternoon. Sheltered as it was by wooded mountains on all sides except the south, the luxuriant vegetation of the place reminded me more of a Mediterranean resort, and I noticed palms and bamboos, fuchsias and a profusion of flowers as we drove up the straggling little street and stopped outside a square white building called simply 'Clandon's'. We had no sooner stopped than a dark, square-set man emerged, a broad smile

on his face, and gave us a warm welcome.

"It really is good to see you again, Mr. Brynton. You've been away too long, to be sure. All of two years, Molly says. And here's herself to welcome you, and the young lady," he added, drawing me into the warmth of an Irish smile that would have melted an ice-cap.

Molly Clandon, small, pale-skinned, quietly businesslike, led us to our rooms. Mine was at the back of the hotel and looked over a pleasant, straggly little garden, with an ancient apple-tree dominating a small lawn surrounded by borders of mixed flowers jostling each other and tumbling over the paths in true cottage-style profusion. Beyond the garden, I had a fine view of the Caha Mountains. Darrel's room was across the passage, and the room we were to use for working in was next door to mine. It was just large enough for a table, two chairs, and a small cupboard, but the window occupied most of one wall and had a similar outlook to mine with the addition of the small area reserved for a car-park, and the effect was light and pleasant. Darrel came in with the portable typewriter and put it on the table.

"Not much room, but enough, don't you think?"

"Yes. And beautifully quiet."

"Your room to your liking?"

"Fine, thanks."

He went out and returned in a few minutes with a stock of typing paper, carbons, stationery, notebooks and folders.

"I'll leave you to arrange these in the cupboard. Molly's just ordered tea for us, so I'll see you downstairs."

We were installed.

Chapter 4

THE COUSINS

We had just sat down to dinner that first evening when I saw the fair young man I had noticed on the boat come into the dining-room. He was shown a table on the other side of the room from ours, and as he picked up the menu he glanced round the room. His eyes fell on me and he smiled and half inclined his head in recognition. I gave him a polite smile back.

"Someone you know?" asked Darrel.

"He was on the boat coming over. With a girl who had a mane of red hair."

"Yes, I noticed the girl. He seems to have lost her. The table's only set for one."

"She's staying with an uncle. I overheard them talking."

"He evidently took note of you, too. A young Adonis."

"Too handsome by half. A literary dilettante, I'd say."

"Any evidence?"

"Only that he's having a book published in the autumn."

"Well, that indicates some hard work, after all. You gave the gentleman some attention, it seems."

"I found the girl attractive," I said coolly.

"Quite. It's a healthy sign, that you should be taking an interest again."

"Darrel, while we're here, will you take me to the place where Adrian was killed?"

He was buttering a piece of melba toast and was slow in

replying.

"I don't know where it was precisely."

"You said Connemara."

"Did I? Well, it was somewhere in the west. I only went to the hospital where he'd been taken, remember. But if I did know exactly where it happened, I shouldn't agree to a pilgrimage there. Too morbid, and bad for you."

"You must stop thinking that you know what is bad or good for me, Darrel," I said calmly. "It's a tiresome habit."

He looked at me speculatively, then gave me a crooked grin.

"So it is. But you know what habits are."

I decided then that I would make no more approaches to him about Adrian. He obviously would not or could not help me. In my quest, I should have to go it alone. But quite how to set about it was hard to know.

The small lounge was full when we had our coffee there, and the fair young man, last in, looked round and then hovered by our table.

"Bring up a chair," said Darrel hospitably, and he did.

"Hope I'm not butting in. Accommodation's a bit scarce in here," he said in his pleasant, drawling voice.

"You're welcome," I said. "Did you arrive today?"

"Late last night. This seems a very good little hotel. My first impressions of Irish food are five star."

We chatted amicably. During the course of the conversation we learned that his name was Nick Barbury and that his cousin, Antonia Mendyp, was staying with an uncle who had retired from London to Cork two years ago, and now lived in a house about a mile away.

"Do they like it here?" asked Darrel.

"Very much. But they miss their relatives, I think. Invitations have been flowing pretty freely across St. George's

Channel. Tonie's their niece and godchild."

"She seemed very excited at the prospect."

"She's young," he said indulgently.

"And you've deserted her?" I asked.

"I don't go so much for the family life. Prefer to be independent and stay at an hotel. I shall be moving around, anyway. I want to go up to Sligo and have a look at Yeats's country."

"More research for a book? I'm sorry, I couldn't help overhearing on the boat."

"Tonie's got a carrying voice. Yes, as a matter of fact I hope to combine some research with the holiday here."

Somehow the conversation worked round to Darrel's expedition to Nepal, drinks were fetched from the bar by both men in turn, and my first impressions of a precious young man were modified. His air of faintly sceptical flippancy masked an intelligent mind, and in my present mood of detachment I found him elegant and pleasing, like a Mozart air. One could listen and enjoy without being involved. He offered the greatest contrast possible to the dark, rather saturnine person of Darrel, with whom I had never felt comfortable. A more formidable proposition in every way was Darrel, although he could exercise a social charm when he chose, a charm which did not quite disguise his authoritarian purposefulness. I quite enjoyed watching the two of them side by side that evening.

During that first week Darrel left me quite free to do my own exploring while he started work on the report of the expedition, based on the notes he had brought back with him, and I spent a good deal of the time being shown the country by Nick Barbury in the red M.G. Antonia came with us twice, but really preferred getting around on a pony, and when she learned that I liked riding, too, she asked me

if I would go with her sometimes. I had ridden quite a lot on the Surrey commons in the days when I had kept house for my father, and although I had done little since, I welcomed the opportunity now, for this country was really best savoured on foot or on a pony, I felt.

"I can't get Nick on a horse," she said. "He thinks horses are ugly, dangerous brutes. Can you imagine?"

"Redundant since cars were invented," said Nick, taking the M.G. smoothly round a hairpin bend. "It's only little girls in black velvet hats in the home counties who still cling to what they foolishly see as a romantic method of transport."

"You'll be considered a heretic if you make pronouncements like that in Ireland," I said.

And the next day, I hired a pony and went riding with Antonia. We set off along a narrow road winding through woods where foresters were at work, and emerged on to a footpath along a stream which ran down a mountain valley. It flowed fast between banks of ferns and small mossy-trunked trees. A few black-faced sheep grazed on the mountain slopes and the bleating of lambs reached us from time to time. We passed a white stone farmhouse, from which a black and white dog rushed, madly barking, making my pony sidle restively, but a voice from within the farmhouse summoned the dog back, and we continued on our way in peaceful solitude again.

Our destination was a lake high up in the mountains, and we tethered our ponies at the foot of the last steep climb up a rocky narrow zig-zag path, as I did not fancy myself doing a wild west rodeo act on my pony. We were both puffing when at last we reached the lake, nestling darkly in a hollow just below us, and we sat down to rest on a rocky bluff, and watched some peat-cutters at work on the

opposite slope.

"Isn't this heavenly?" said Antonia. "Imagine, I might be stewing in a classroom doing maths if I hadn't managed to persuade my mother to let me leave school now instead of in July. I was only marking time there until I go to a secretarial college in the autumn, but there was an awful fuss. Fortunately, Daddy was on my side. After all, this will be my last summer of freedom before being chained to a job. I shall make the most of it."

They were beguiling companions, these two cousins, I thought. In their company, surrounded with the natural beauty of a country that had a timelessness about it, so far removed from the noise and rush and tensions of life in London, it would be easy to relax and let cobwebs be spun over my eyes. There was a potent spell here. Perhaps it was something to do with the Atlantic light, but I often had a feeling of magic unreality about the landscape. It seemed full of mystery and sadness as well as a healing peace and beauty.

But no spell silenced Antonia's tongue, and she chattered away like a happy starling.

"Nick says your mother was a famous opera singer. He knows a lot about music, and has records of hers. You must have been thrilled, going to see her in operas."

"I never saw her. She sang in opera houses abroad once she had made her name, and before then I was too young. She died when I was fourteen. I've always regretted not seeing her. She was very lovely, and must have looked superb in some of her roles. I've some photographs of her in costume. I remember framing the one of her in Tosca and hanging it in my bedroom." It had been a glamorous substitute, I thought, for a real flesh and blood mother.

"Exciting, having a famous person in the family. Our

family's a huge one. Heaps of relatives, but all very ordinary, I'm afraid. Unless Nick becomes famous through his book."

"I shouldn't worry. There's a lot to be said for ordinary families. I hardly ever saw my mother. My father was a brilliant scientist, and lived in another world, too. He became really eccentric. For months after our housekeeper left, he used to call me by her name. And it was nothing for him to go off to work in his bedroom slippers and return in the caretaker's overcoat."

The tales of my father's eccentricity kept Antonia in peals of laughter. Many of his exploits were funny, but the joke had palled on me for I had been more or less responsible for his welfare, and it had been an odd experience, living with a man who had made me feel like a piece of household equipment, for he was as little aware of my existence as he was of the daily news in the papers. The whole world passed him by, unnoticed in his concentration on virus research. I had often wondered how he had ever come to marry and have a child, but I supposed there must have been a time when he had some human feelings. Had my mother's absorption in her career driven him to a similar total absorption in scientific research? I should never know, but it was impossible to visualise him as a young man with warm blood in his veins.

"I expect you're talented, too, with such parents," observed Antonia.

"Afraid not. I can play the piano reasonably well, and I love music. That's all I've inherited from my mother."

"And her looks, I guess."

"That's flattery, if you like," I said, smiling. "A very pale version, I'm afraid. The peat those men are cutting looks like Christmas pudding."

"Which reminds me that I'm hungry."

"And our sandwiches are down below with the ponies. We'd better get moving."

We sat by a stream and had our lunch, and lazed there afterwards, content to watch the water tumbling over its rocky bed, beguiled by its music, the sun warm on our backs. The ponies cropped contentedly nearby, and sheep were grazing on the lower slope of the mountain opposite us. High up, the peat-cutters were still at work.

"I love the smell of gorse bushes in the sun. Like coconut," I said lazily, watching a lamb who was bleating pitifully for its mother who was out of sight down near the stream. The ewe seemed singularly indifferent to the calls of her offspring and went on grazing in the shadow of a rock.

"London pride," said Antonia, picking a flower that was growing from the base of the rock against which we were leaning and putting it in the buttonhole of her cotton shirt. "Odd, to see that growing here."

"There's a lot of it back in the woods."

"Did you manage to persuade Darrel to come to that ballad concert and dance in the village this evening?"

"Yes. Or rather, Nick did when he cornered him in the lounge last night. I think Darrel was a little reluctant, but Nick was clever enough to make it difficult for him to refuse without seeming a boor."

"Good. I mean, three's an awkward number. I like Darrel. When I first saw him, I thought he looked interesting but impregnable. But I bumped into him in the hall of your hotel yesterday when I brought a message for Nick from my uncle, and he was so nice and not shut-off at all. He showed me the relief map in the alcove in the hall and pointed out some places I ought to see. He knows Ireland well."

"Yes. He could charm a lark out of the sky, if he chose. It's a skill he doesn't often choose to employ, though. He prefers the more blunt approach."

"Well, so do I. You know where you are then. It should be fun tonight. I'm not so keen on ballads, but there's going to be some folk-dancing and old-time dancing as well as modern dancing, and I rather enjoy kicking up my heels in that sort of thing."

"Sounds a real Irish mixture. Not quite Darrel's cup of tea, I'd say, but we shall see."

We jogged back along the path beside the stream, letting the ponies go at their own pace, meeting only one brown donkey on the way. He eyed us with his large dark eyes and refused to budge off the track. Antonia dismounted and gave him an apple left over from our lunch. This appeared to soften him, for he allowed her to persuade him off the narrow track on to the boulder-strewn grass, where he stood, munching his apple, following us with his sad eyes. The dappled sunshine and shade was welcome when we came to the path through the woods. Half drugged with sunshine and the steady clip-clop of the horses' hooves, I listened with part of my mind to Antonia's chatter while the other part dreamily roamed off on its own course. I had enjoyed the day and found Antonia an easy and refreshing companion. She had kept all thoughts of the past at bay until now, when we jogged along through the woods, and thinking of the sheer beauty of the world on that May day, of the physical enjoyment of climbing the mountain to the lake, of feeling the air on my face when we had cantered across a meadow, I was suddenly and piercingly aware of all that Adrian had lost, and my heart was filled with a bitter protest against this waste of a young life. He, who was so full of life and vigour. And I saw again the dark, haunted face of Deirdre.

And the same questions rose up to mock me.

"I'm sorry, Tonie. I was dreaming. What did you say?"

"You looked as though you were seeing ghosts. I was only pointing out the rustic table and chairs in the clearing over there. The foresters must have made them for picnics."

I turned to look and agreed that they looked inviting. Ghosts was the right word. I wondered how I was ever going to lay them.

* * *

As it turned out, the social at the village hall that evening infected all of us with its cheerful, unpretentious fun. It was true that I had to blink away sudden, treacherous tears at one of the sentimental ballads, which threatened to melt the cool armour of detachment which had successfully enveloped me over the past weeks, but the weakness passed, and I found myself in good spirits again, dancing a barn dance with Nick at which we did surprisingly well, for with all his languid air, he was nimble enough when it came to the point and had no inhibitions about looking foolish. And Antonia was in her element, her red hair and lively personality drawing Irish lads like moths to a candle. Darrel, too, was in a more carefree mood than I had ever seen him, and danced most of the dances, partnering Antonia, me, and a black-haired beauty who danced like an angel. He had the last waltz with me. It was to the tune of 'The Rose of Tralee' and we all sang it. Darrel, I noted, had quite a good baritone, and we, at least, sang in tune.

Nick drove Antonia back to his uncle's house while Darrel and I walked along the village street towards the hotel. It was barely dark, for the daylight lasted almost to midnight in these westerly regions.

"Shall we walk on past the hotel for a little and have a

breath of the sea before we go in?" asked Darrel.

"Yes, let's. It's such a lovely night."

"You've enjoyed this evening, haven't you?"

"Yes. More than I expected. I think I was born with simple tastes. I didn't think you were, though."

"Depends on the mood. I was glad to see you so relaxed It was a lucky chance, coming across Nick and Tonie. Just the right company for you."

"Yes. They help a lot. Sometimes, though, and especially today, I've felt almost guilty, thinking of Adrian and what he'll never enjoy."

"That's foolish. And Adrian was the last person to want you to grieve too long."

"But the waste of it, Darrel."

"I know. The pity of it. The old cry against the cutting off of youth. Common enough in wars, God knows, but in peace all the more bitter and senseless, somehow. But don't feel guilty about finding enjoyment in life again. It's the only sane, healthy thing to do. And I shall have some work for you next week. That will help, too."

"You're quite a good doctor, Darrel."

"I know this patient very well. That helps."

But not all that well, I thought. This patient has to find out more about that tragedy before she can really put it behind her, whether you think that morbid or not. But I was grateful to him just then, under the warm Irish sky glittering with stars, with the dark silky sea lapping the strand below us.

Chapter 5

BOMBSHELLS

The next week I started work on Darrel's report, and the days soon settled into a pleasant routine of editing and typing for part of the day, and holidaymaking for the rest, with no lack of enjoyable activities. I walked, swam, went riding and motoring, sometimes on my own, sometimes with Darrel or our new acquaintances, and often the four of us would join up. And I became deeper and deeper enmeshed in the magic of Ireland, but was no nearer finding the answers to those questions which lurked in my thoughts like trout in the rivers, half concealed, still and shadowy, and then darting out to pierce me. But the biggest bonus of those days was that I was restored to my old state of physical fitness and the nights were no longer an endless purgatory.

Perhaps the near-idyllic conditions of that sunny June might have lulled me into letting the griefs and puzzles of the past sink without further probing if two things had not happened which blew me out of my calm and pleasant waters with the suddenness of a torpedo. And they happened on the same day in early July.

We had planned an excursion to Killarney, and the four of us set off early in Darrel's car on a morning that promised to be as fine and warm as its predecessors, for the Irish climate had not ceased to show us its fairest face ever since we had arrived, confounding all my previous concep-

tions. I had half expected something tame and commercialised, as famous tourist highspots tended to be, and was quite unprepared for the wild beauty of the gorge through the heart of the mountains, the extent of the lakes and the richness of the vegetation round them. As I had found so often during the past weeks, words failed, and I just drank it all in with an almost sensual abandonment to its beauty. Only in the town itself did we find ourselves in a tourist atmosphere, with the usual souvenir shops, guides and photographers. But the Killarney lakes and mountains were ravishing and beyond commercialisation.

Antonia, of course, had to do everything, from riding through the Gap of Dunloe on a pony, being driven round one of the lakes in a horse-drawn jaunting car, which earned her strong approval as did the jarvey who drove it and entertained her with his stories, and finally to rowing on the lake. Nick kept her company on the boat while Darrel and I elected to go round the gardens of an estate bordering one of the lakes, Darrel from a professional interest, and I because I liked gardens and was in such a state of intoxication at all I had seen that I welcomed a respite from Antonia's busy tongue and a chance to get my breath, as it were. I couldn't have been more mistaken about that.

After we had walked through the gardens, we strolled along a path through the woods bordering the lower lake, glad of the shade, until a side track led us to a small clearing by the lake, and we sat down, for we had an hour before our rendezvous with Nick and Antonia.

"What a splendid lotus-eating summer this is!" said Darrel, stretching himself beside me and clasping his hands behind his head as he gazed across at the mountains.

"I'm getting drunk with beauty. But you, at least, are doing some work to keep your feet on the ground."

"With your aid. You're a good editor, Jean."

"I've got interested in the subject. I never realised that ecology was such a fascinating study. It sounds dull, but, after all, it embraces all life on this planet. No wonder you stopped specialising in virology."

"I found I didn't want to go on learning more and more about less and less. I preferred a wider picture, even if one lifetime is only long enough for a shallow survey."

"And are you fretting to get back to it?"

"Do I look as though I'm fretting?"

"Far from it. I'm surprised and can only put it down to Ireland's magic spell. It even works on a scientist."

"You judge us all by your father. Generalisations are foolish."

"Oh, I'm not criticising. I've changed my ideas about that. My parents were both lucky to have such absorbing work. And so are you. I can see now how much more satisfactory it is to base your life on satisfying work rather than on personal relationships. I intend to do just that now."

"You'll get over that loss in time, Jean. I don't think you're the type to do without the warmth of personal ties."

"One grows up," I said drily.

"One grows more cautious, perhaps." He rolled over and looked at me, leaning on his elbow. He was tanned to a dark brown and the arm beneath the short-sleeved sports shirt was smooth, with a lean strength. I was glad he was not hairy, having an aversion to hairy men. "You don't give so much away as you used," he added, his eyes studying me.

The sun was warm on my face and bare legs. Over his shoulder I could see the mountains outlined against a deep blue sky.

"How tiresome I must have been, all raw and exposed."

"Tiresome? A little, with me. I seemed to arouse your

aggressive instincts. But with others you were open-handed and open-hearted, puzzled and hurt, I think, at the rebuffs, but always game to keep trying. I wasn't blind, you know. I realised what your home life was like."

"Perhaps it was good schooling."

"I don't think so."

"And you a realist! Isn't it better to learn young that life isn't loving?" I said lightly.

"No good you playing the sceptic, my dear. It's not you."

"How do you know?"

"You may have put up some defences, and I'm not quite clear about what's behind them just now. It's not scepticism, though, I'm sure. And I find the new cool Jean Lansford rather intriguing."

"Really?" I asked mockingly.

"Yes, really, and don't try to needle me, because you won't succeed today. I'm in far too mellow a mood, seduced by this sentimental, bone-melting country. You've grown up fast during these past months. I'm sorry that fate made it such a painful growing up, but I must say I prefer the mature version."

"That I should live to hear flattery from the tongue of Dr. Darrel Brynton!"

"Oh, I can do better than that if I try. You're very nice to look at. The fining down process of the past months has revealed the good bone structure of your face, and large tawny eyes and hair the colour of butterscotch give a very warming effect. Your mouth has a sensitive mobility and although it's a shade on the generous side for strict classical beauty, it makes the face so much more interesting than your mother's, with its prissy little cupid's bow and its chocolate-box appeal. Or perhaps that was a bad photograph hanging in the hall."

"It was, rather. I had a better one in my bedroom," I said, hiding my confusion behind a light tone.

"And, of course, figure-wise," he went on mercilessly, "you've got her beaten all the way, that is unless you've a taste for those Amazon-like Wagnerian women mounted on steeds and brandishing spears. I prefer something less solid myself."

"She had the Metropolitan audience at her feet."

"I grant her an exquisite voice. It's come down to you in your speaking voice. A lot of music in it. Did you never try singing?"

"One in the family was enough. Anyway, I preferred the piano, but I've no great musical gift, and my mother never could bear mediocrity."

I was talking quickly, my eyes lowered to the level of the watch on his wrist, something peculiar happening to my heartbeats. He took my chin in his hand and tilted my face to meet his scrutiny.

"But it's a face I could once read unerringly. Now I'm not sure what goes on behind those eyes."

He smoothed the hair back from my forehead and then ran his hand gently over my dress until it came to rest on my waist, and immediately, at his touch, I felt as though I had dropped down a deep well. I could feel his hand through the thin material of my dress with a burning awareness in every nerve of my body, and was unable to say a word. After a tense few moments, he smiled and said lightly,

"Well, it will wait. And nobody but a cold fish could sit by Killarney on a sunny day with an attractive girl, and not kiss her."

His lips on mine were firm, unhurried. And I felt as

helpless as a twig carried over Niagara Falls, shaken, amazed, bewildered by the clamour of senses never experienced before. And with Darrel. Darrel, of all people. A man I had respected but never liked. I must be mad, I thought, when he released me and I lay gazing up at him, trembling. I collected myself as rapidly as I could, and said, a little shakily but with a good shot at a smile,

"Ireland has a lot to answer for. There's something very potent in the air here."

He glanced at his watch.

"We're due to meet the others right now, and it's quite twenty minutes' walk to the Meeting of the Waters."

I scrambled to my feet, trying to sound brisk and practical as I said,

"We'll have to step it out, then. Fortunately, it's no hardship to have to wait about in this country where every view would repay a lifetime of standing and staring."

But my legs were as shaky as a jelly, and they felt no firmer for Darrel's hand down my back, brushing off bits of leaf and grass. I hardly knew what we talked about as we walked to our rendezvous with Nick and Antonia, for I was in a daze. I sat on a seat at the tree-encircled meeting place of the Killarney lakes and looked at the weir while Antonia talked about the boating expedition and I didn't take in a word of it.

I sat in the back of the car with Nick for the drive back, for I badly needed the cooling effect of his flippant tongue. It had never been like that with Adrian, I thought. The climate of our love had been kind and gentle. There had been no scorching wind to sweep me off my feet. It had been a happy and safe refuge. This was a dangerous madness. Darrel, tough, dominating, had quite enough hold over me through the conditions of my father's will. It would

be crazy to give him still more. For him, the interlude by the lake had doubtless been a pleasant part of the holiday mood. He had said as much. But he was no fool, and too experienced not to recognise the detonating effect he had had on me. It must be rectified at all costs. I had no mind to burn my fingers at that flame. But it had shaken me all the more because I had never experienced anything like it before.

I was particularly cool and businesslike at dinner that night, but it was an uncomfortable meal for me, made more so by the air of faint amusement in Darrel's attitude. Lordly, arrogant male, I thought. I shan't give you that satisfaction again.

But a second detonation had yet to come, and it originated from a genial, harmless-looking man and his wife, who came up to us as we were drinking our coffee in the lounge.

"Well, if it isn't Darrel Brynton!" he said, a smile on his round face. "It's a small world. You remember Laura. She married me in the end."

Darrel got to his feet and greeted them with what I felt was less than cordiality, and introduced them to me. Hugh Fairmont was a fair, fresh-complexioned man, a little on the fleshy side, with bright blue eyes and a well-scrubbed look. He was in his middle thirties, I guessed. His wife was tall and thin, auburn-haired and good-looking in a rather haggard way, well-dressed, and with a sophisticated poise. Darrel did not invite them to join us, but Hugh Fairmont drew up some chairs as though no invitation were needed.

"Nice to see you again, Darrel," he said. "You wear well. No change at all. I've put on a bit of weight, as you can see. All these business conferences, and a good wife, eh, Laura?"

"Darrel's the lean and hungry sort," said Laura Fairmont

with a little smile which didn't suggest good humour.

"And such men are dangerous. *Julius Caesar*. Am I right, Laura?" asked her husband with a pleased smile.

"Quite right."

"Laura's a culture-vulture, you know. Does her best with me, but it's hard going for her, I'm afraid. Still, you do know now that I didn't sleep all through that performance the other week, dear."

She ignored this and said to Darrel, "I hear that they're opening a new Horticultural Station in Sussex, and you're to be in charge, Darrel."

"Yes. We'd outgrown the old Station. That will gradually be phased out."

"And you've given up research to be Director?"

"I left research some time ago, but shall always have a special interest in that department, of course. You remember Dr. Lansford, who did such good work there? Jean's his daughter."

"I wondered, when I heard the name. He was a brilliant scientist, your father. And what about Dr. Lagos?"

"He retires in eighteen months. He'll just see the old Station out."

"Pompous old ass," said Hugh Fairmont. "Hadn't a clue about running costs. I prepared sets of accounts a child could have understood, but not our friend Lagos, with all those letters after his name. You'll do a far better job as Director, Darrel."

"Of course he will," said Laura impatiently. "And when do you start, or have you started?"

Darrel explained the situation briefly, and Laura went on,

"What became of John Stretton?"

"No more shop, Laura," said her husband. "We're boring Miss Lansford, and I know what you are when you get on

to the old days at the Station. She was a laboratory assistant there, Miss Lansford, and never forgets it. She runs a jolly good little boutique of her own now, but she still has a hankering after the old research days. I think it was all those bright lads in the white coats, eh, Laura?"

"How long are you and Miss Lansford staying here, then?" asked Laura.

I left it to Darrel to explain, which he did with a cold, dispassionate conciseness which should have dispelled this old pals atmosphere. It was made quite clear that we were there to work and I was acting as his secretary.

"Really?" said Laura, with delicately raised eyebrows. "How interesting! What's the book, Darrel?"

"Merely the report of an expedition to Nepal."

"Did you go on that?" she asked me.

"No," I replied blandly, and stared her out.

"Are you staying long?" asked Darrel.

"Only a couple of days. We're touring. Due in Cork the day after tomorrow. Hugh organises a tour as rigidly as a set of accounts. We've a long schedule drawn up, with our precise movements plotted almost to the half-hour. It's kept in the car to refresh our memories in case we should be twenty minutes behind time."

"That's a slight exaggeration," said her husband good-humouredly, then his expression became solemn as he went on, "Sad business about your cousin, Darrel. Heard about it from a chap at my golf club who worked in his firm. Just before we came away, as a matter of fact. When he heard we were coming to Ireland, he warned me to take care along that mountain road in Connemara. Shocking affair. Such a nice young chap, Adrian. I remember he came to the Station that day when we had the official opening of the new laboratories. He was very interested in the heating of the

glasshouses, I remember. I showed him over them. Of course, being in a firm of heating engineers, he knew what he was talking about. I couldn't believe it. So young. How old was he, Darrel?"

"Twenty-six."

My heart had contracted at the sound of Adrian's name, the old ache throbbing. Darrel's flinty expression should have warned Hugh Fairmont, but he was obviously an insensitive man, with the morbid curiosity which most people have about disasters.

"As a matter of fact, we were staying at the hotel near there two nights ago and the chap in the bar got talking about it. Adrian had stayed there the night before it happened. There was a thick mist in the morning and they advised him not to go on that road until it lifted, but he was set on meeting someone that morning. Some talk of a local girl . . ."

He was cut short by Darrel, who said firmly,

"It's time we had a drink. What can I get you, Laura?"

"A pink gin, please."

When we had chosen, Darrel asked Hugh to come to the bar to help him fetch them. While they were away, Laura Fairmont tried to find out more about me under a cloak of polite interest, but I disliked inquisitive people and stonewalled with equally polite pleasantries. It was one of the bonuses of the detachment which I had gained over the past months that I could now hold my own with people instead of eagerly spilling everything out to any beckoning finger.

"Do you find Darrel easy to work for?" she asked, when it had become obvious that I was disclosing nothing of my personal affairs.

"Yes. He has a clear mind and a scientist's precision at expressing himself."

"You've had experience of this sort of work?"

"Yes," I said with a smile, wondering what Darrel was saying to Hugh over at the bar, and frustrated by the way he had cut off any disclosures about Adrian.

"Have you known Darrel long?" she asked, relinquishing all subtlety.

"For eight or nine years. He and my father were good friends."

"Your father was honoured," she said so sarcastically that it chilled the air.

"It was their work that was the bond."

"Men for work; women for an occasional distraction on the side, brushed off like a troublesome fly when work calls. Heaven preserve me from men like him." Her tone was light, but edged with acid, and her eyes were on the object of her hostility as he came towards us.

"Thank you, Darrel," I said, taking my gin-and-tonic from him.

I could tell from the sheepish look on Hugh Fairmont's face that Darrel had told him about Adrian and me and had shut him up on that subject, for he made no further reference to it, and talked instead about the economic state of Britain, golf, cars, cruises and tax havens. To anyone less obtuse, Darrel's cold, monosyllabic responses and my own glazed efforts to appear interested would have brought a term to these meanderings, but it was nearly eleven o'clock and several drinks later before Laura, who seemed to have spent most of the evening studying Darrel in a smouldering private world of her own, stood up, and said abruptly,

"Well, I'm for bed. Perhaps we can join up tomorrow."

"Afraid we shall be tied up with work," said Darrel smoothly. "I recommend a visit to Garnish Island while you're here. The Italian garden is particularly fine now."

"We'll see," said Laura. "Come on, Hugh. Hope I get a good night's sleep tonight. We had a noisy room in Dingle last night. We're in the front. Are you?" she asked and it was not clear to which of us she was addressing this question.

"Darrel's at the front. I'm at the back," I said gently. "I imagine both back and front bedrooms are equally quiet here."

I saw Darrel's mouth twitch as he stood up and the Fairmonts took their leave.

"Well done, Jean," he said when they had gone. "My admiration grows. Sorry about that. Haven't seen Fairmont or Laura for years. He managed our accounts department. Left about five or six years ago."

And there wasn't much doubt about which bright boy in a white coat Laura had been interested in. For the first time, I looked at Darrel as other women saw him. Ever since my schooldays he had been a familiar face in my life, but now I was seeing him with different eyes. I wondered why I had been so blind to the attraction that was there. Too young to recognise it before I met Adrian, perhaps, and after that Adrian had filled my world. And such men are dangerous. Yes, indeed. If my relationship with Adrian had seemed like a sunny meadow in Maytime, involvement with Darrel would be like a dark jungle.

I went to bed with the peace of mind which I had gained in Ireland completely shattered by the experience at Killarney and the few sentences about Adrian from Hugh Fairmont. It was the first lead of any sort about his death that had come my way, and Darrel had snapped it short. Somehow, I must get hold of Hugh Fairmont and find out more.

Chapter 6

MANOEUVRES

Darrel, true to his determination to keep me from morbid thoughts, saw to it that I had no time to spend on investigations the next day, for he gave me a wad of manuscript which he wanted that evening.

"I can't get on to the next section until I've seen this in typescript. As we were out all day yesterday, I wonder if you'd mind?"

I couldn't very well object. The Fairmonts had taken Darrel's hint about the Italian garden and were spending the day there, so I pinned my hopes on being able to waylay them on their own some time that evening.

I worked hard on the typewriter all day, and Darrel came into the office just as I was finishing.

"A letter from F.R. came by the afternoon delivery, Jean. He wants me to send him copies of the specifications for the new laboratories and the extensions together with a copy of the amendments I suggested to the architect. I hate to ask you to work any longer today, but he's seeing the architect shortly about another matter and would like to be put in our picture, too. Do you think you could type the copies after dinner? I'll call them over to you if it will make it easier."

F.R. was Dr. Lagos, the Director of the old Horticultural Station, and from the extreme formality of Darrel's letters to him I had deduced that cordial was not the word to describe their relationship.

"Is it that urgent?" I asked, suspecting Darrel of further strategy to keep me from the Fairmonts.

"Not really, but he's apt to get fractious if he thinks he's being kept out in the cold. It's not his pigeon at all, but he has his status to consider, and wants to appear knowledgeable if the architect raises the subject of the new Station. If he's wise, he won't. But I'm ready to humour the old man as he's off my back at last. If he wants it in time for this meeting, though, I ought to post it tomorrow."

"I see. Well, it will help if you'll call them over. I'm not familiar with building terms, and specifications make little sense to me."

"Thanks. After coffee, then."

I would have liked to see the letter from Dr. Lagos. I somehow doubted whether the meeting with the architect was quite so imminent.

I had a shower and changed for dinner in record time that evening, hoping to catch the Fairmonts alone, but fast as I was, Darrel was before me, talking to Laura and Hugh over an apéritif. They broke up as I appeared and I had no chance to gather more than the fact that they had been greatly impressed by the Italian garden before they left us for their table in the far corner of the dining-room. Darrel and I were already having coffee in the lounge after dinner when the Fairmonts came out. They were not stopping for coffee, but Laura lingered behind her husband.

"I'm so sorry you couldn't join our little party at the pub tonight, Miss Lansford. I must say you're a most conscientious worker. Darrel's to be congratulated on having someone so devoted to his work."

Her smile was acid enough to have curdled the milk I was just then pouring into my cup, and I looked at her in surprise, but before I could speak, Darrel said smoothly,

"I realise my luck. Have a good time, Laura."

"Come on, dear," called Hugh. "We said we'd be there at eight."

"You haven't changed, Darrel. You haven't changed a bit," said Laura bitterly, and followed her husband in what was obviously far from a party mood.

"And what was that in aid of?" I asked Darrel.

"Oh, they chummed up with some people they met in the Italian garden today, and arranged a meeting in the pub down the road tonight. Wanted us to join them, but I explained that we were otherwise engaged."

"You settled that in the bar this evening, I suppose."

"Yes. Do you mind? I knew it wouldn't be your cup of tea. Hugh's a decent chap but as boring as they come, and I didn't think drinking sessions had much appeal to you."

"I like to be consulted before invitations are refused on my behalf."

"But you'd already agreed to work. If you've finished that coffee, shall we go?"

Upstairs in the office I faced him angrily, aware that he had baulked what was probably my last opportunity to get hold of Hugh Fairmont.

"Darrel, since we've been here we've worked well together. You've treated me as an adult, which you never did before. But now you're starting to take me in charge again, and I don't like it."

"My dear girl, what are you making a fuss about? Laura issued an invitation which I knew you wouldn't want to accept, for a time which you'd already promised me for work."

He was foxy, I thought. He could always out-manoeuvre me. And I had to be careful.

"That's not the point. Are you trying to come between me

and Hugh Fairmont because you think he might talk about Adrian again? You shut him up about that last night, didn't you?"

"Of course. I knew it could only be painful hearing for you. I didn't want him upsetting you just as you're showing signs of getting over that sad business."

His sentiments were irreproachable. And yet... There was something bothering me.

"Well, it's kind of you to be so protective, Darrel, but don't overdo it."

"The prickles up again. I've known you too long not to feel protective. There's always something in you ready to come out and fight me, though. I wonder why."

He was looking at me speculatively, and I said, with what I hoped was a nonchalant air,

"Because I'm old enough to resist being taken charge of. And I am not the only female to find you provoking, to judge from Laura Fairmont's expression tonight."

"Laura's too intense by half. Always was."

"And how did you cope with all that intensity before?" I asked sweetly.

"A word in your father's ear about work being impeded, and Laura was moved to another section."

"I can imagine."

"If we stop quibbling and get on with the job, we'll have time for a walk, and you'll be able to wax lyrical again about the sunset over the mountains. Much more rewarding than swilling gin-and-tonics with the Fairmonts and listening to Hugh holding forth."

And there was no reply to that. So I typed as Darrel read out the specifications, and we had finished by ten o'clock. I was stiff and a little tired, and I rubbed my shoulder muscles as I stood up.

"Here. Let me," said Darrel, and turned me round and kneaded my neck and shoulders with firm fingers so that I felt the stiffness melting away.

"You're good at this," I observed.

"I learned the knack from a friend when I was studying for exams. Better?"

"Much."

"I'm sorry it's been such a long session."

I tried to keep myself from weakening, remembering the previous day's detonation and my resolution to refuse him any more dominion over me, but he had turned me round and was looking at me with a reminiscent expression, and the touch of his hands threatened to send me spinning down that waterfall again. Dark grey eyes, almost black, with little puckers at the corners. Had he looked at Laura Fairmont like this once, and then brushed her aside when he wanted all his concentration for work? Was he manipulating me now, to keep me from Hugh Fairmont and morbid thoughts?

"I'll fetch my coat. I'd certainly like a breath of fresh air before I go to bed," I said shakily, and slipped away to my room.

We walked along the village street and turned off on a path which climbed through woods out to a knoll where a wooden seat had been placed for the better enjoyment of the view over the bay to the mountains beyond. The sun had just disappeared behind them, leaving a golden light over the peaks still. The bay, dotted with little wooded islands on our side, had a calm beauty that should have soothed the most perturbed spirit, but I was nervily conscious of Darrel's arm along the seat behind me and his hand lazily fingering the coil of hair beneath the flat bow that tied my hair back.

"Now confess, this is better than the party at the pub."

"Much better. I was only arguing for the right of choosing myself."

"Point taken. I suppose that's Venus, just above the shoulder of that mountain."

"These western skies are so beautiful."

"Yes. Ireland has a way of making you think what fussy, foolish, busy little lives we make for ourselves. All rush and noise and self-importance."

"I can't see you settling for a monk's life of retreat, though."

"That's the trouble. The questing, restless mind."

That was the trouble, indeed, I thought. If only I could stop my restless mind asking torturing questions. We sat there quietly until the sky darkened and the air grew cool, and the mountains looked black in the distance. Walking back, Darrel took my arm and began to whistle 'By Killarney's Lakes and Fells', which did not help me to attain that calm detachment which I wished.

I recognised Laura Fairmont's white coat some way ahead of us in the village street, and heard Hugh's bellowing laugh. They left their three companions at a neighbouring hotel and walked on. Darrel slackened his pace.

"Can't let that vinegary voice of Laura's spoil our peaceful mood," he said. "You don't know what an asset that low voice of yours is, Jean. It's a pleasure to listen to, even when it's saying harsh words to me, as it often is."

"And a fat lot of notice you take of them."

"Vanity persuades me that a kind heart beats underneath for me, in spite of all."

"You're in a very frivolous mood tonight. I shan't pander to it."

"No? Not even a good-night kiss before we go in? This

little lane's just made for the job."

He had drawn me off the street into a narrow lane between two cottages, where trees hanging over from the garden behind made a dark tunnel.

"No, Darrel."

"What are you frightened of? Just a good-night kiss by way of a thank-you for sacrificing the whole day to my work. Do you really object to that? You have only to say that you do, and make me believe it."

And with one arm round my waist and one hand moving up my shoulder and neck to tilt my chin, he studied my face in the shadowy light from a window, and I could not say I objected. And again his kiss was unhurried and firm, and I yielded against all my wishes to withstand him. He made no attempt to detain me after that kiss, merely taking my arm again and saying gently,

"A good way to end the day."

When we came out to the street again the Fairmonts had disappeared into the hotel, and there was no sign of them when we went in. They must have gone straight to bed.

Alone in my room, I sat down on the bed bewildered and shocked at my weakness. Darrel had got everything his way that day. He had effectively sealed me off from the Fairmonts, kept me working that evening with what I still suspected was a manufactured excuse of urgency, refused an invitation for me of which I was ignorant and of which I should have remained in ignorance if Laura Fairmont hadn't brought it up as they were leaving, and then had me kissing him good night in a mood of imbecile docility. I must be mad, or bewitched. And my time was running out. My one chance of discovering what had really happened to Adrian, what he was doing in Ireland, and what part Deirdre had played in his life, lay with Hugh Fairmont, and I could be

pretty sure that Darrel would be around to head me off in the morning. I ought to have been grateful to him for his concern, I supposed. After all, he had no idea what was gnawing at me. But, as always, his assumption that he knew best for me riled me. And he did seem to have overdone the concern. He had warned Hugh Fairmont about raising painful memories for me. That should have been sufficient. Why try to fence me away from him so completely? I determined that somehow, in the morning, I would out-fox Darrel and have a word alone with Hugh Fairmont. I must.

Chapter 7

A DAY TO REMEMBER

The Fairmonts were leaving immediately after breakfast the next morning, and again I failed to corner Hugh. They had breakfasted earlier than I had anticipated, and were leaving the dining-room as I arrived, with Darrel hard on my heels. Although I hurried through a brief breakfast, Darrel opted for no more than porridge and toast, too, and he was beside me in the hall as we said our goodbyes to them. Hugh was obviously in a hurry to set off, and I doubted whether I could have detained him even if Darrel hadn't been there.

I went up to the office, furious at having failed to get any clues from the one man who could have helped me. Even if Darrel had warned him to say nothing, I knew I could have approached Hugh Fairmont in a way that would have set him talking again. A fact which Darrel had no doubt appreciated.

Then, at the last minute, luck came my way. I was standing by the window of our little office waiting for Darrel to bring me a couple of pages he had altered and wanted retyped. Below me, the Fairmonts were loading up their car. There was some altercation going on and Laura's voice floated up to me clearly.

"I don't care what you say, Hugh, I'm going to stop at that shop and buy some of the Irish linen. I've one or two birthday presents to get and that's the best selection I've seen so far."

"That means half an hour at least. I know what you are when you get nosing round these tourist shops."

"Well, we can be half an hour behind schedule for once," she snapped and got into the car and slammed the door. She was evidently in a bad temper, and I fancied Darrel's attitude towards her during the past two days might have had something to do with that.

They drove out of the car-park in a swirl of dust and a whining of gears. I was at the table when Darrel came in a moment later. He glanced out of the window, then put the pages on my table.

"That's all we need bother with today. I've scribbled a note to F.R. When you've done these, what about going round to that sandy bay we found last week? Good for swimming, and it's going to be hot. Take our lunch and tea. Make up for being imprisoned yesterday."

"Good idea. Before I start on this, though, I must just slip across to the chemist for a plaster. I've nicked my finger."

"Badly?" he asked, eyeing the handkerchief I was wrapping round a finger.

"No. Not much more than a scratch, but it won't stop bleeding and I don't want gore all over the typescript. Shan't be a sec."

"O.K." I could see him reckoning that the Fairmonts would be at least a mile away by now.

I ran all the way down the straggling little street to the gift shop. As I had expected, the Rover was parked outside, and Hugh Fairmont was in the driving seat glumly studying a map. I had made my plans.

"Hullo," I said, stopping by his open window. "I thought you'd be half way to Cork by now."

"Laura wanted to buy some presents. I bet she'll take

about an hour."

I looked sympathetic as I said, "And that'll throw your schedule out. I'd like to go touring. There's so much of Ireland I want to see. But I lack your organising ability, I'm afraid, and a successful tour depends on that."

"You're right. That's what I always say to Laura. She laughs at my planning, but she'd be the first to grumble if we landed up in a place without a decent hotel, or had to miss something she wanted to see because we'd not allowed enough time."

"I agree. Is that your schedule?" I asked, peering in at a large sheet of typing clipped on to cardboard which projected from the front shelf of the car.

"Yes. I had it typed at the office."

"What a splendid idea! Can I have a look? It may help me plan a tour myself."

He produced the schedule with some pride. It really was a meticulous piece of work. All the stopping places were there, underlined, with the names of one or two hotels to each, and the milages between the towns, together with any places of interest to be looked at en route. I had no difficulty in reading the name of the village and the hotel in Connemara where they had stayed. Fortunately, there was only one hotel there.

"Well, I think that's a marvellous feat of planning. Do you book up ahead?"

"Usually telephone from one hotel to book the next except in the most popular places, where I booked before we came away. At this time of the year it's not difficult."

"Well, all the best for the rest of the tour," I said, straightening up. "I shall know where to come for advice if I'm ever able to come back and tour Ireland for myself."

"Any time," he said genially.

I left him and hurried back, scribbling the name and address of the Connemara hotel on the back of an envelope I had in my bag. I nearly forgot to get the Elastoplast and put a piece on my finger.

Nick was just emerging from the dining-room when I arrived back. He was always a late breakfaster. I asked him if he and Antonia would like to join our picnic, for I felt there was safety in numbers.

"Good idea. I'll rustle up Tonie and we'll see you at the bay some time."

Darrel gave me an old-fashioned look when I told him that Nick and Antonia would be joining us, but merely said,

"Right. Must say I'm rather relieved that the Fairmonts weren't staying longer. Hugh means well but he's as tactless as an elephant. I hope it hasn't reopened the wound, the reminder about Adrian. I've thought recently that you were getting over the worst of it."

"Life goes on. One has to accept things sooner or later. I don't think Hugh troubled me as much as Laura grated on you. You were positively glacial."

"I don't like intense women. And that one has claws."

He would be quite ruthless, I thought, and for a moment felt sorry for Laura Fairmont. Looking up at his dark face, it occurred to me how little I really knew him, for all the years of our acquaintance. When I was young, and he had teased and fenced with me, I had felt the yoke of his authoritarian ways and resisted it, but he had revealed little of the man beneath the smooth, assured surface to a gauche young girl. Now my green days were over, but I was still floundering with him, sometimes fencing, sometimes at ease with him, until this new element had suddenly upset all my preconceived notions about him and had me more at his mercy than I had ever been, and more than I liked to be. It

was a madness I must conquer. I had been hurt enough.

And as I tapped away at the typewriter, that little bothering uneasiness which had dogged me the previous day came back. Again I felt that Darrel had overdone the protective attitude in his policing of me during these past days. Niggling away, like a small stone in my shoe, was the thought that he was hiding something from me about Adrian's death. He had right from the first been very sparing of words about it, and I had put it down to his own pain at the loss. But the way he had pounced on Hugh seemed to suggest more than that. For the first time, I wondered whether Deirdre might in some way be connected with Darrel. Whether perhaps she had turned to Adrian for help and advice. Darrel was abroad. Was she seeking information as to his whereabouts? Was she another like Laura with an obsession for Darrel, and Adrian had felt sorry for her? It was all conjecture, and pretty high-flown at that, but no more unlikely than that Adrian, who had been so close to me, whom I had either seen or spoken to on the telephone almost every day of the year of our engagement, who was going to marry me and had spent hours with me searching for a flat and had been as overjoyed as I at finding it, had all the time been in love with another girl. That was impossible. I should have known, must have known, about it if it were so. We shared everything. Every day's little happenings.

Errors in my typing pulled me up and made me concentrate on the work in hand. I had made up my mind about one thing, though. I was going to get to the bottom of it in spite of Darrel's efforts to make me forget it. And because I never underestimated Darrel, I should hide my intention from him and do this on my own.

The fuchsia hedges along the lanes were laden with bloom

as we drove to our rendezvous. The little cove reminded me of a Cornish cove except for the lavishness of the flowers on the grassy plateau of the cliff, where orchids in hundreds bloomed among the daisies and buttercups and vetches. Behind us, the mountains seemed to be swimming in a violet-coloured haze beneath the burning sun.

Darrel spotted a fulmar gliding above the cliff a little way off, and as there was no sign of Nick, we went off to explore, and found a nesting colony of fulmars on the cliff ledges there. He helped me out to a jutting rocky perch for a better view. He was light on his feet and agile, his long legs making nothing of steps that taxed mine. He took my hand and pulled me up the last pitch, standing behind me and holding me firmly against him on the narrow ledge from which point we had a perfect view. He was strong and hard-muscled, and I felt perfectly safe on this airy perch which I would have hesitated to tackle on my own.

We stood there for some time, enthralled by the graceful flight of the birds, and the young chicks on the ledges which seemed too narrow to be safe for them. Then my eye was caught by a commotion below, and I looked down to see gannets, terns and cormorants all diving into a small area of crystal-clear blue water.

"Look, Darrel. A shoal of fish must have come in. And what's that dark thing sticking out of the water?"

"A shark's fin. You can see its shape under the water. It's come to join in the feast."

The dark shape looked like a torpedo. I was glad that on this quiet stretch of coast there was none of the shark-killing I had read about. The sharks that inhabited these waters were harmless creatures and I was as strong a conservationist as Darrel. I could never tire of watching gannets diving, their powerful snowy-white bodies hurtling down from a

height with tremendous force, straight as an arrow. Beside them, the terns looked very dainty performers.

It was one of those magic occasions which I should never forget—the blue sea sparkling below me, the white birds diving, the loitering shark, the sound of the waves, and Darrel behind me, his hand on my heart. We must both have been reluctant to move or speak and break the spell, for it was quite a while later before he said,

"I can hear the sound of a car horn. I suspect the others have arrived."

When we had climbed back to the cliff top I turned to him.

"Wasn't that marvellous?"

He smiled and took my hand.

"It's good to see you happy again. They've taken their time, those two," he added as Antonia waved.

Nick explained with a long-suffering air.

"Never have Tonie with you if you want to keep an appointment. I had to stop three times on the way. Once while she made matters much worse by trying to help a small boy get his cows down the lane into a meadow, then so that she could croon over a baby donkey, and finally when she shrieked 'Stop' and nearly gave me a heart attack. She just happened to have seen a kingfisher, and shot out of the car to go dashing along the river bank, much to the annoyance of a fisherman there."

"He wasn't annoyed at all. After you'd gone back to the car we had a very interesting conversation about fishing. And if you'd helped us with the cows instead of annoying them by creeping along on their tails in the car, we'd have got them off the road much sooner."

"Help with the cows? You mean sing to them?"

"Don't be silly," said Antonia, giggling. "You could have

got a switch and taken the ditch side."

"You must be joking," said Nick.

He looked swooningly elegant in a pale-blue silk shirt with a dark-blue silk cravat, and fawn drill slacks. I smiled and gave him a hand with the picnic basket as we told them about the shark, which had now disappeared, although the terns and gannets were still diving.

Antonia, disappointed at missing the shark, elected to swim straight away.

"Such energy!" exclaimed Nick, settling himself down in the shade of a large rock, for he had the fair colouring which reddened painfully with any sunbathing "I propose to cool off after the frustrations of that drive. And if you get involved with the shark, don't expect me to come to your rescue."

"It's not a man-eater. Coming, Jean?"

"Think I'll keep Nick company. I'd like to cool off, too."

While Darrel and Antonia were swimming, I lazed beside Nick, watching Darrel's dark head beyond the breakers. Nick was flipping through the pages of a paperback of Irish poetry.

"How's the literary research going?" I asked.

"Hardly moving. This southern country has a softening effect on one's willpower. Time I moved north to Galway and Sligo and saw Yeats's country. My mind's getting as soft as the vegetation here."

"I know what you mean."

"You've tempted me to linger longer than I intended, too."

I looked down at him but could read nothing from his face. He was leaning on one elbow, looking out to sea, the picture of graceful indolence.

"It was a stroke of luck for us, too, linking up with you

and Tonie."

"You intrigue me, Jean. Such a good companion, but sometimes you seem miles away, and sometimes, when you don't think anybody is looking at you, I have the feeling that you're unhappy. Wrong?"

"Not altogether. I've been unhappy. Getting better now." I hesitated, then went on, "My fiancé was killed in an accident last March. I cracked up a bit then, and came away to find my feet again. That's all."

"I'm sorry."

He said no more. It was one of the good things about Nick. He was sensitive enough to know when to stop. I liked him very much. Picking up his book of verse, I opened it at the bookmark and read the poem which faced me.

> The red rose whispers of passion,
> And the white rose breathes of love;
> O, the red rose is a falcon,
> And the white rose is a dove.
>
> But I send you a cream-white rosebud,
> With a flush on its petal tips;
> For the love that is purest and sweetest
> Has a kiss of desire on the lips.

"Read it out," said Nick, squinting up at me. "You've the right kind of voice for poetry."

I did so, then closed the book and Nick sat up and said,

"A pretty metaphor. Makes it all sound very simple."

"Your way's best, Nick. To play it cool. Have you never been burned?"

"Well, not quite burned. I don't go for married life and domesticity at all. A cage I intend to avoid. And I don't much like hurting people, either. So it's meant the light

touch, with both parties knowing the lie of the land from the start."

"A very sensible philosophy. Life has a way of being plain awkward sometimes, though."

"I watch it like a lynx," said Nick, smiling. "Any light distraction needed, though, and I am at your service, Jean. And I'd be taking a risk at that."

It was not always easy to know just how serious or flippant Nick was. And I didn't like hurting people, either.

"I don't think I've ever been very good at light distraction, but I appreciate the offer. Good friends, though. That I'd like even more. And you would be quite safe."

He put a hand on mine.

"It's a deal. I shall push on up north on Friday, I think. But we'll keep in touch. Will you be going back to publishing?"

"I don't know. I liked my work. Something in that line, probably. But I'm making no plans until we return in the autumn."

"You won't go on working for Darrel?"

"Oh no. This is only a temporary arrangement which happened to fit in with our plans. I wanted a summer in Ireland but hadn't enough money; Darrel wanted a long report typed and planned to do it here while he's waiting to take up a new appointment. So we made a business deal."

"I see. I like him. A first-class brain. Too uncompromising for comfort, perhaps, but I always admire people who know where they're going and are not deflected. To Antonia, of course, he's superman."

"Nothing serious?"

"Just a case of hero-worship, I guess. She's at the age."

"She's a young eighteen. Such lack of sophistication seems rare these days, and endearing, somehow."

"M'm. She's a nice kid. Carefully brought up in the family tradition. Her mother's a Rainwood, like mine, and the Rainwoods are a large, closely-knit family, with a matriarch of a grandmother who somehow seems to have kept her hold on the younger generations and imposed her standards, up to a point. We all kick against them sometimes, I more than most, and one or two rebels have contracted out, but by and large the tradition holds. And it has its points."

I thought of my own family life, which was almost non-existent. Of the cold aridity of it, the loneliness.

"A sense of security. Of belonging. That's important, to females, anyway. Tonie's so confident and somehow open to life. Worth all the sophistication in the world, I'd say."

"She'll need some armour, like the rest of us," said Nick drily.

Darrel was coming back now, waving Antonia back, too, for she had gone out as far as he, and there was a cross-current to be considered.

"If you want editorial work, and fancy working on the staff of an arts magazine, let me know. I've just given up the editorship of one to concentrate on books, but I'm still connected with it as a reviewer."

"Thanks. I'll keep it in mind. I don't seem able to look ahead now, though. Ireland has cast a spell over me."

"And you'll never be the same again. A sort of magic in the air. All these myths and legends which are so much alive here. The romantic landscape. The ruined castles and abbeys, the heroes, the dark tragedies of the past, the sentimental ballads. The contradictions in the people themselves, so friendly here in the south, so lively, and yet in a way still haunted by dreams and their tragic history. It's a potent brew, liable to go to anybody's head."

"Too true. Will you be coming back here or touring until you return home?"

"Back at the end of August to spend a day or two with Uncle Roger and then escort Tonie home. It's a help being able to leave most of my luggage at my uncle's so that I can travel light."

A plan was hatching in my mind, but Darrel and Antonia were walking across the sand and I dismissed it for the moment, turning my attention to the picnic basket.

That afternoon, we were able to make arrangements with the owner of a small dinghy to have the use of the boat for a few hours. Its owner lived in a tiny whitewashed cottage in a dip in the cliffs, and with the friendliness of all the Irish people we had come across, he helped us pull the boat down to the sea and saw us launched. Nick and Darrel took an oar each and we set out to row to the next bay, which was inaccessible by road and entailed a steep climb on foot over the cliff. The sea was calm and the distance not far.

This boat was the first orthodox rowing boat we had seen in these parts for the local fishermen all used long, narrow, keelless boats which they called curraghs, and which looked unbelievably flimsy for the sea, for they were simply made of tarred canvas stretched over wooden frames. But when we had seen the men rowing them, they made fast progress. One passed us, making for an island about a mile offshore, and we waved. It was like a greyhound and we an overweight plodding dachshund in its wake.

We rounded the headland and crossed the small bay. Antonia clambered up on the little jetty and tied the boat to a bollard while Darrel and Nick shipped the oars. It was a rather more rugged bay than the one we had left, with a steeper cliff face and jagged rocks scattered along the beach. But the sand was as golden and the sea as deep and clear

a blue. And its emptiness was something we now took for granted along this coast. Two curraghs were drawn up on the slipway, and Nick and Darrel went down to look at them. They were carrying the tea basket and bathing clobber, and I was hung about with my camera and Darrel's fieldglasses as I strolled with Antonia along the jetty.

"What a picturesque little place!" said Antonia, turning to look round the sweep of the bay. Then she gave a gasp, uttered a cry of "The boat!" and before I could grasp what had happened, she had sprinted back along the jetty and dived in after the boat which was moving gently away in the direction from which we had come. Antonia was a good swimmer and the boat had not drifted far. I ran along the jetty but felt no alarm until I saw that she was not swimming after the boat but floundering in a dazed sort of way, as though she scarcely knew in which direction she was going. I tore off the camera and fieldglasses, shouted for Darrel and Nick, and dived in, well clear of the rock I could see a few feet below the water. Antonia had drifted away, splashing feebly, and was nearly awash when I reached her. I grabbed her hair and said,

"Float, Tonie. I'll tow you."

I don't know whether she understood me, but mercifully she did not struggle and I had her on her back, supporting her head when Darrel reached us. He took her from me.

"I think she hit a rock when she dived in," I gasped. "She seems stunned."

"You all right?"

"Yes."

"There's a strong current here. We'd best make for the other side of the bay. The current will be half with us."

And looking back, I was amazed to see how far we had drifted from the jetty. I turned and saw that the boat had

fetched up against a rock on the other side of the bay and I could see Nick racing round the beach.

"If we're lucky, the rope's caught and will hold the boat there. We'll make for it but the tide's falling so watch you're not carried out. Keep on the landward side of me," said Darrel.

It was hard work, trying to keep against the outward pull of the current, and must have been harder for Darrel, burdened with Antonia.

"Use the old-fashioned breast stroke, Jean. Less tiring."

I had been doing a crawl, but he was right. I plodded on like a tired dog, Darrel never more than a few yards from me, his eyes on me.

I saw Nick tearing off his shirt as he half scrambled, half slithered over the belt of rocks which jutted out to sea at that end of the bay, then he was swimming out to the boat which was still bobbing under the wall of the rock about twenty or thirty yards ahead of him. I saw him dive when he reached the boat. I found myself willing him to get the rope clear, for I was beginning to tire and doubted whether even Darrel, burdened as he was, would be able to fight against the tide and the current to keep on a course which would bring us to the rocks at the far end of the bay. We should be swept out beyond the headland. And I knew he wouldn't leave either of us.

Antonia was struggling a little and said something which I couldn't hear.

"Shut up and keep still," said Darrel, and she did.

"He's got the rope free," I gasped, and watched Nick scramble into the boat and reach for the oars.

By the time he got to us I was all in, and hung on to the side of the boat gasping while Darrel heaved and Nick pulled Antonia into the boat. Then Darrel's hand was under

my back and Nick was rolling me into the boat, too. Antonia was coming round, and sat in the bottom of the boat holding her head. The boat rolled and lurched as Darrel heaved himself in, then it steadied.

"What happened? I hit a rock, didn't I?" said Antonia.

"Seems like it. Let's have a look," said Darrel, breathing heavily.

He and Nick examined her while I lay across the back seat gasping like a landed fish. There was a bumpy discoloration on her forehead and a graze down one cheek, but otherwise she seemed all right.

Our four dripping bodies looked a sorry sight. Nick's fair hair was plastered to his head and hung down to his eyes giving him an odd monkish look, and his elegant slacks had been reduced to two wet tubes stained with green and torn from his scramble over the rocks. Antonia and I in our thin summer dresses came off rather better, for the water streamed off the drip-dry materials and their very flimsiness helped. Antonia's hair was a dripping mass round her shoulders, and she pushed it back as though the weight hurt her head. Darrel pulled off his cotton roll-top pullover, wrung it out, draped it over the seat beside him and picked up an oar.

"Best get back to the beach and change into our bathing things, and see how Tonie feels after a cup of tea," he said. "Smart work, Nick."

"Luckily the rope held the boat until I got there," said Nick with a wry grin, and they started to row back to the jetty.

The sun was hot, and my dress had stopped dripping by the time we got out on the jetty. I turned to help Antonia, but she clambered up without difficulty, and Darrel tied up the boat. We chose a stretch of sand backed by some good

flat rocks, changed into our bathing things and spread our clothes out on the rocks to dry. Then I unpacked the tea-basket, and was reassured to hear Antonia say that she was hungry. She looked a little pale and had been very quiet since being hauled out of the sea. Now she said awkwardly, "I'm awfully sorry. I thought I'd tied the boat up securely. Thanks for getting me out of it. We might all have been drowned, and it would have been my fault."

"Not to worry," said Darrel, putting a hand on her shoulder. "There was no danger. We merely got our second swim in earlier than anticipated."

"Remind me to initiate you into the intricacies of knots, and in particular the clove hitch, since you don't seem to have had any girl-guide training," drawled Nick, stretching himself out in the shade of the rock.

"Well, I suggest we have a nice quiet tea, then call it a day. I think Tonie ought to let a doctor examine that bump," I said.

"Agreed," said Darrel.

"No. I've spoilt enough of the day. I feel quite all right. Just a bit of a headache."

"All the same, we'll do as Jean suggests," said Darrel firmly, and there was no more argument.

"As a matter of fact," said Nick, opening one eye, "I believe my knees are dislocated. Running across sand and rocks is not to be recommended after the age of ten."

"Is that what you did?" asked Antonia, interested.

"Well, seeing you all take headers into the sea like lemmings, I had to do something different. Anyway, before diving in, Darrel pointed to the boat and I trotted off like a good dog to fetch it."

"Fortunately for us. Thank goodness Molly caters for good Irish appetites. I'm ravenous," said Darrel, taking the

egg sandwich I handed him.

We all felt a lot better after tea, and I looked round our little circle with a warm affection. I felt we all belonged. It was a nice feeling.

"If I'm not to be burned to a nice shade of boiled lobster, I must rescue my shirt from the rocks over there," said Nick.

"Nick, you sacrificed your beautiful shirt for me!" exclaimed Antonia, coming back to form after her second cup of tea.

"Greater love hath no man," replied Nick, getting to his feet and draping a towel round his shoulders.

"If it's damaged, I'll buy you another one just like it."

"Start saving then, girl."

"I'll come with you," said Darrel.

While they were away, Antonia and I got dressed, glad to find that our wispy clothes were quite dry. I packed up the tea things and we lazed in the shade of the rock, watching Nick and Darrel walk along the beach and then climb out along the jutting belt of rocks. When they came back, Nick was wearing the shirt over his bathing trunks. Darrel's dark head topped his by several inches. They were both good movers, I thought, Darrel having the kind of lithe, sinuous grace which one saw in Spanish dancers, and which Adrian had possessed, too.

"You won't have to start saving up, after all," I said. "Nick's shirt looks intact."

There was no reply. Antonia was fast asleep.

We were all rather tired by the time Nick and Darrel had rowed back to our original bay and returned the boat to its owner. Nick drove off with Antonia, but Darrel moved his car a few yards into some shade and opened all the windows while we sat on a low stone wall nearby and waited for it to

cool off. It was the first time we had been alone since the afternoon's excitement.

"I think Tonie's all right, but Nick will see what his aunt says about getting a doctor to have a look at her. Are you feeling all right now?" asked Darrel, looking at me with a slight frown. With his hair tousled, his pullover stained white with salt, his navy slacks crumpled and still damp, and his face burned dark brown by the sun, he looked a seafaring man all right. Rather piratical, I thought.

"A bit tired. Otherwise, fine."

"Best take it easy tomorrow. You hadn't much to spare this afternoon."

"No."

I looked at him, and forgot all about being tired as I was swamped with a fierce longing to be in his arms. It startled me, the intensity of it. I couldn't take my eyes away from his, and he read the message all right, for the next moment I was in his arms, his body hard against mine as he kissed me, and my arms went round him. There was black velvet in front of my eyes, and my mind was at the mercy of a pagan abandonment that left me shaken and speechless when at last he let me go.

"It does happen, you know. Don't look so shocked," he said gently.

But it hadn't happened to me before and I was shocked. I had loved Adrian, but it had been nothing like this. I did not love Darrel, but . . . I was bewildered by the dark force of feeling that had swept me off my feet, beyond analysis or reason. I went blindly to the car and got in. Darrel followed me. He did not start the car, but leaned on the steering wheel and studied my flaming face.

"What is it inside you that always fights me, Jean?" he asked quietly. "Some little beleagured remnant of our early

differences that won't give in. Why not? What are you frightened of?"

I could not answer him. There was no one answer. Just a confusion of fears and uncertainties. Fear of being quite at his mercy, of being hurt, of misreading his feelings and courting yet another rejection. Uncertainty about my own. Was this love, which wore so different a face from the gentle, smiling one I had known before with Adrian? This was all conflict and tension and a wild force that could spring up suddenly like a gale out of nowhere and I as helpless as a leaf. With Adrian, there had been fondness and laughter and contentment; and at the end, a mystery. If I could explain that to my satisfaction, perhaps I could understand the present better. And Darrel, watching the struggle in my face, was waiting for an answer. All I could say, shakily, was,

"I think Ireland's bewitched me."

"That's too easy a get-out. Relax. Give it a chance to grow, Jean. Don't back away like a frightened horse."

"One way and another, this has been quite a day. So much has happened. It seems an age since we watched the fulmars together. So if I seem overwhelmed, Darrel, it's because I need time to assimilate it all."

"Fair enough," he said, smiling, and started the car.

Chapter 8

CONSPIRACY

I worked hard the next day, bringing my typing of Darrel's manuscript right up to date. For the first time since we had arrived in Ireland, the weather lived up to its reputation and a soft rain, scarcely more than a mist, was in the air all day. I hoped our golden summer had not deserted us, but it was a good day for work. Luck was with me for my plans, because that morning Darrel had received a request from the Horticultural Station for a summarised version of the Nepal expedition which could be read out at some meeting or other. This would mean four or five days' hard work on his part and it had to be sent off by the following Wednesday.

That evening at dinner, jumping with nerves inside but outwardly cool and calm, I said to Darrel,

"Nick's going off on Friday for an extended tour. Did he tell you?"

"Yes. A sort of literary pilgrimage."

"He's planning to stay in Galway on Friday night and spend the weekend there before going on to Sligo. I wondered if you could spare me on Friday. I'd like to go with him and sëe something of that area. I thought I might hire a car, stay in Galway on Friday and Saturday night, and drive back on Sunday."

I could not read his expression. Surprise? Displeasure? There was no knowing. He merely said,

"I shall be bogged down on this summary over the

weekend, and of course you're free to spend it how you like."

"It seems a good opportunity for a break. I'm up to date with your manuscript, and you probably won't have the summary ready for me to type until Monday. I'd like to see Galway." He was looking at me searchingly and I played my trump card. "At least, it's not so much Galway as Lough Corrib I want to explore, and Nick suggests we try to hire a boat while we're there."

That should turn his thoughts away from Connemara, I thought, and I was right, for he sounded more encouraging as he said,

"Good idea. Lough Corrib's very lovely. Ruined castles and monasteries on its banks, and the east bank boasts an exceptionally fine range of wild flowers. If the weather's good, you should enjoy it. I'd let you have my car, but I may have to drive to Cork on Saturday."

"I can easily hire one from the garage at the end of the village street, and I know that, like most men, you hate anyone else driving your car. But thank you for the near offer."

I felt a little guilty, but that didn't prevent me from seeking Nick out the next morning. He was about to walk over to his uncle's house to see if Antonia had fully recovered, and I went with him.

"I've a favour to ask, Nick," I said as we walked along the lane which led to his uncle's house.

"Granted."

"That's rash of you. Let me explain. You know I told you about my fiancé being killed. It was in a road accident in Connemara. He was on holiday. I was never able to discover just what happened. I want to go there to try to find out, and to see the place. Darrel is dead against my delving into

the past. Thinks it's morbid. I thought if I could come with you to Galway, spend a few hours there, and then leave you and go on to Connemara on my own, it would make an enjoyable day of it and Darrel need not know about the Connemara bit."

"Why not? He doesn't have the last say about what you should or should not do, does he?"

"No. But I want the Friday off and I think he might make difficulties. The bare weekend wouldn't give me enough time. I need a clear day there."

Nick looked at me with a reflective air.

"He could be right, you know. About being morbid."

"No. I've got over the worst of it now. But I just want to clear up a few points. And I've a friend in Connemara I'd like to see, too." I supposed it was not pushing it too far to refer to Deirdre as a friend.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, I'd be delighted to have you with me for the day, or the whole of the tour, for that matter."

"Thanks, Nick. But I'm bound to see my job out with Darrel. It will avoid a lot of fuss, though, if he thinks there's nothing more than Galway and Lough Corrib involved."

"Count on me. Discretion is my second name. Connemara's a bit of a bleak stretch, I believe. What about accommodation?"

"I've the address of a small hotel recommended by a friend. I shall telephone today and book a room. If they can't take me, I expect they'll be able to put me on to someone who can. I shall only want a room for Friday and Saturday night. I'll be driving back on Sunday."

"Darrel's car?"

"No. He may want it on Saturday. I shall hire one from

that garage at the end of the village."

"I thought of making an early start tomorrow. Eight too soon?"

"No. I'll be ready. On these quiet roads it shouldn't be difficult to keep in touch."

"Splendid. What a pity you can't come on the tour with me."

"Research is best done on your own."

"And you an editor? Still, you have a point. Literary matters might seem of secondary importance."

"Not to a professional writer."

"Are we all such cold fish?"

But I smiled and refused to be drawn on that one, and we discussed the route we would be taking to Galway until we reached the pleasant little white house half-way up the hill.

Nick's uncle was stowing his fishing tackle in the car outside and he greeted us with a cheery wave of his hand. He was a tall, clean-shaven man with thinning grey hair. A dedicated fisherman, I had found him a kindly man on the few occasions we had met.

"Grand morning for fishing," he said, straightening his back as we came up.

"Is it?" I asked, for the clouds were low and there was a faint drizzle in the air again.

"No good to fishermen, all this hot sunny weather we've been having. The rivers are too low, and the trout see you coming. Can't tempt you young people, I suppose?"

"Of course you can't," said his wife, who had come out with a Thermos flask. "Why should they want to spend the day sitting on a river bank gazing at the water? Particularly on a day like this."

"Chance for contemplation. Thank you, dear. I forgot that," he said, taking the flask from his wife and stowing it

in his basket.

"We came to see if Tonie had quite recovered from that little bit of excitement the other day," said Nick.

"As bright as a new penny again," said his aunt. "The doctor was quite reassuring. Now do come back if the weather gets worse, dear."

After we had waved the car off, Mrs. Mendyp turned to me with a smile. She was a thin, dark, energetic woman, with a pleasant no-nonsense air about her.

"He won't come back until tea-time, of course, no matter what the weather, but I always have to say it."

"He's enjoying his retirement. That's obvious," I said.

"Yes. His only regret is that he didn't retire earlier. Thirty-five years in a City office. And if it hadn't been for a take-over, he'd probably still be there. At the time, he thought it was a disaster. A golden handshake seemed no compensation for losing his life's work. Now he knows it was a blessing. An odd joker, life."

"We're the odd jokers," said Nick. "We wear blinkers."

"Now come along in and I'll make you some coffee. Tonie's in the garden picking some runner beans for me."

"I really ought to get back. I've some correspondence to deal with this morning," I said.

"Be a devil. Let Darrel wait," said Nick.

And I did. We sat in the bay window of the little sitting-room looking out at the garden while Nick's aunt carried on a running conversation from the kitchen as she made the coffee. Antonia came down the garden carrying a colander full of beans and waved with a broad smile when she saw us. As she drew near, I could see the ugly bruise on her forehead still, but the grazes had more or less healed and she certainly seemed none the worse for wear.

We chatted lightheartedly over the coffee, but I was still

conscious of a sense of guilt at entering into a conspiracy with Nick to pull wool over Darrel's eyes. And even more conscious of the unpleasant consequences if he found out.

"It's your last day, Nick. If you're not already committed, what about driving me over that mountain pass to Kenmare? I'd love to do that again, and it may be the last chance," said Antonia.

"Righto. But I've some packing and planning to do, so we'll have to be back early this afternoon. We can have lunch at the hotel there, as it's definitely not picnic weather, except for hardy types like Uncle Roger."

"Bless you! I'll just dash up and change into something warmer."

"No hurry. I've some telephone calls to make first."

"I suppose you can't come, too, Jean?" said Antonia hopefully from the door.

"Afraid not. Work to do."

"Why not try to get Darrel to come as well, then? Postpone the work until tomorrow."

"Sorry, Tonie. He's got some urgent work on hand. Has to be completed by the middle of next week, which doesn't give him any time to spare."

"Too bad," she said, and whisked away.

"And I've some cakes in the oven I must see to," said Mrs. Mendyp.

When we were alone, Nick said, "Would you like me to make that Connemara call for you? I shall be booking a hotel at Galway for myself. It might be simpler for me to do them both from here. The telephone in the hall of our hotel is a bit public and you can hear every word that's said. I was waiting for it one morning last week and had to listen to a whole recital of instructions from that stout party who sits by the door in the dining-room to her husband, who is

joining her next week. The things that man's got to do! Defrost the fridge, cancel this, cancel that, water the pot plants, throw out all perishable food, be sure to give the neighbour so many tins of cat food and the cat's own basket with a clean piece of blanket from the bottom shelf of the duster cupboard. Then we went on to the clothes he had to bring, including his lightest weight underpants because it was so much warmer here. It was a fascinating insight into domestic life, I can tell you."

"And made your own resolve to remain a bachelor even stronger," I said, laughing.

"You're telling me! Anyway, if you really want to keep your plans to yourself, it might be safer to let me phone. Uncle Roger has his telephone in decent privacy in his study, where all he studies is books on fishing."

"Thanks, Nick. If you would, then. Here's the name of the hotel. I haven't got the telephone number, but you'll be able to find it in the directory. If they haven't a single room for the two nights, anywhere they recommend would do."

"Shouldn't be any difficulty. It's still a bit ahead of the main tourist season and that's not the most popular area for holidays, anyway. I'll let you know this evening what I've fixed."

I said goodbye to Mrs. Mendyp, and was sent on my way with a hot rock cake which tasted delicious as I walked back down the lane eating it. I spent the rest of the day finishing Darrel's letters and clearing everything up in our little office. Then I studied the map, and reckoned that it would take me about an hour and a half to drive from Galway to the hotel in Connemara.

Nick caught me on the stairs on the way down to dinner that evening and told me that he had booked my room at the hotel. And all through dinner, with Darrel's dark face

opposite me, my conscience gnawed at me. Nick disappeared immediately after dinner, presumably to do his packing, but Darrel suggested a walk along the river after we had finished our coffee, for the weather had cleared and the evening was fine.

The long light evenings in Ireland made the day seem twice as long, and I never tired of the beauty of the evening skies. That evening, the sinking sun had emerged beneath the lifting belt of clouds and the sky was streaked with pink and gold and duck-egg blue as we walked along the village street and then along the river bank to a little humped stone bridge. Perhaps because my conscience would not go to sleep, I could find little to say, and Darrel seemed in a reflective mood as we leaned on the bridge and watched the clear water flowing by beneath us.

"Confounded nuisance about this paper I've got to write. Otherwise I'd have liked to join the Galway trip," he said.

"Still, you have seen Lough Corrib before."

"M'm. Must try to steal some days for a bit more touring around before our time's up. County Clare repays some study. Wonderful alpine flora there in May and June. Rather late now. But the coast is grand."

"No more news from the Brigadier?"

"He still refuses to let anyone set foot in the place until the day of completion. Maddening, since we can't really finalise our plans without access."

"Unreasonable of him, in view of the fact that he put back the completion date at the last minute."

"Yes. He hates having to sell the estate. I can understand him in a way. It's been in the family for generations. But he's a difficult customer. After all, high taxation isn't our fault, though from his attitude you'd think we were the villains of the piece."

"It's a big job you've taken on. Will you be living on the site?"

"Yes. A house the old chap built in the grounds for his grandson will be my base. The grandson only stayed there six months. His wife didn't like it. They emigrated to New Zealand last year. That was the last straw for the Brigadier, I guess."

"And now you can't wait to get cracking."

"I wouldn't say that. It's a long-term project, after all, but it's good to be in on the ground floor. To have it all there for the making. I'm enjoying this interlude in Ireland, though. With you."

He put his arm round my waist and my heart began to race. I concentrated on a leaf floating by on the water, and he went on quietly,

"We work well together, Jean."

"Yes. I think you've stopped seeing me as a child."

"Well, children grow up. It's taken a long time to get a bridge between us, though. You were always a prickly little devil with me. Disliked my having any jurisdiction over you."

"It was humiliating."

"Nonsense. You were still only a child when your father died. Too much pride. But I think your home life did that to you. Pride was your only refuge, perhaps. You seemed to me terribly vulnerable."

"Well, I'm a tough nut now," I said lightly.

"Are you? Tougher, anyway. Your heart's bomping like mad." He turned my face to his. "You're not by any chance running away? This trip to Galway, for instance."

"Three days."

"To muster your defences? It won't be any use, you know."

"I must be getting back. I've a case to pack and we're making an early start in the morning."

"You haven't answered my question."

"You know all the answers, Darrel," I said, moving away.

The sun had set now and in the woods near the bridge it was growing dark. He took me in his arms and kissed me, and although I tried to resist, I couldn't. I clung to him, trembling.

"It won't be any use," he repeated gently. "You're past the point of no return. Why should it frighten you?"

"I told you. I need time. That bridge still looks a bit wobbly to me."

"What a cautious girl you are!"

"What a dangerous man you are!"

"We'll make a good team," he said calmly, and we walked on.

In my room, packing, my conscience won and I decided to tell him. I couldn't mislead him any longer. I shouldn't let him stop me going, but I would tell him. He had gone into the office to put in an hour's work on the paper before going to bed. I snapped my suitcase shut and went to see him.

The room was empty, but the light was on and a half-smoked cigarette was resting on the ashtray. There were various papers strewn over the table, and an open notebook. He had started making a rough scheme of the lecture on a sheet of foolscap, and had pushed my typewriter aside to make room for this array. I noticed a flimsy piece of notepaper on the floor and picked it up to replace it on the table when I noticed the signature on it, and it was as though someone had hit me on the head with a sledgehammer. It was evidently the last sheet of a letter, and there were only a few lines. I stared at them in stunned disbelief.

I shall never forget. How can I ever forget any of it. The love, the cruelty, the way it ended. It will stay with me all my life. But I can pray. Please, Darrel, write sometimes. I shouldn't like to feel that all contact was lost. Leave me that one small link.

Deirdre.

I scrabbled frantically through the papers on the table to see if I could find the rest of the letter, but it was not there. Then I dropped the sheet on the floor where I had found it and fled back to my room. A minute or two later I heard Darrel come back and the door shut. I shouldn't be telling him anything now.

I sat on the bed, my mind in a daze. So it *had* been Darrel who was involved with Deirdre. I was beginning to see the picture now. Had she turned to Adrian for help? To find out Darrel's whereabouts, perhaps. He was in Nepal at the time. But why had she come on that trip with us, and why had Adrian not told me about it? Ashamed of Darrel's part in it? And on the boat, of course, I'd been too ill to invite confidences of any sort. There were still things to be explained. Deirdre would tell me. I had no doubt that she was the local girl Hugh Fairmont had mentioned just before Darrel could shut him up, and in that case the barman would be able to give me her address. I should find out the whole truth, and then I'd talk to Darrel. I'd certainly talk.

Chapter 9

CONFRONTATION

There was a queer unreality about the next day because I seemed to be two people. One drove a Morris car in the wake of Nick's M.G., arrived in Galway for lunch, strolled round the town, which was not looking its best on that grey day, went on a motor-boat trip on Lough Corrib, which was beautiful in spite of the soft drizzling rain which had set in, and made sprightly conversation with Nick. The other was living in the past, on a boat in the North Sea, remembering the dark haunted face of Deirdre, the way Darrel had broken the news to me, the absence of any clear explanation of why Adrian was in Ireland; and in this second person, a dark anger burned at the deceit, and a fierce determination to get at the truth took total possession. And underneath it all, there was a nightmare sense of disintegration. As though my whole world was falling apart.

I do not know whether Nick noticed anything amiss. If so, he gave no indication. Over tea in Galway we argued about Yeats and agreed about James Joyce, and it was all completely unreal. He persuaded me to stay and have dinner with him at his hotel, and as I knew I could do nothing about seeing Deirdre Lome that night, I did not take much persuading. The prospect of a few hours on my own in a strange hotel with only my angry churning thoughts for company was not all that enticing.

I left Galway at eight on the final stage of my journey.

The grey cloud cover had not lifted and I wanted now to be at my journey's end, so I drove as fast as was safe on that winding, undulating road which passed innumerable small loughs after the enormous expanse of Lough Corrib was left behind. Here the landscape was very different from the soft south. Only few and stunted trees, and then, nearing the coast, no trees at all, just a desolate rock-strewn moorland, empty beneath the darkening sky. I passed a solitary tinker's cart on the way, and saw only one other living creature, a pony sheltering by a peat stack. Ahead, the conical peaks of a range of mountains looked black and forbidding.

It was to this bleak landscape that Cromwell had driven the Irish, I remembered, under the edict 'To Connaught or Hell'. And it seemed to me on that grey evening that an air of tragedy and suffering still lingered on there in that denuded landscape. In sunshine it would have a stark appeal, no doubt, but just then it seemed in tune with my own mood of angry desolation.

I took the wrong road after about an hour, and found myself on the coast road which brought me to the rugged cliffs of the west. I got out of the car in the teeth of a strong wind to look down at the Atlantic waves breaking far below me. They offered no comfort to my searing thoughts. Darrel had lied to me and deceived me. And somehow that seemed the most shattering betrayal of all. Whatever happened, even if I had to tear the place apart, I was going to find out the truth about him and Deirdre and Adrian, and why Adrian came to Ireland and was killed.

I drove back to where I had taken the wrong fork, but the mistake had added half an hour on to my anticipated time and it was just on ten o'clock when I came to the village, which was no more than a handful of cottages, the usual grocer's shop with its licensed bar, and the small, unpreten-

tious hotel. So this was where Adrian had spent the last night of his life, I thought, as I got out of the car, stiff and tired after so much driving. I could not shake off a queer sense of foreboding as I locked the car, picked up my suitcase and went into the hotel.

The girl behind the desk in the little hall gave me a pleasant welcome, and it looked a clean place if not exactly lavish. I noticed that there were several people in the little bar off the hall and decided to postpone my enquiries until the morning, for I was conscious now of a grey exhaustion. Intense, concealed emotion was very taxing, I thought, and as I followed the girl up to my room I could think only of a hot bath and bed.

The room was small, but clean and comfortable. I unpacked my few things, was glad to get out of my clothes into a smooth clean nightdress, wrapped my dressing-gown round me and went in search of the bathroom, hoping that hot water was not a scarce luxury here. It was not, and I soaked out some of the tiredness in ample water into which I had poured a liberal amount of perfumed bath oil. And all the time, my thoughts were seething with Darrel, Adrian, Deirdre, and a car smash only a short distance from here. I was holding myself together to get at the truth; beyond that, I could only sense an abyss. With my towel over my shoulder, soap box in hand, for I never liked the meagre little wafers of white soap provided by hotels, I went back to my room, hoping I should be able to sleep in spite of the turmoil in my mind. As I closed the door behind me, I stifled a scream and dropped the soap. Darrel was sitting on the bed looking at me.

"Good evening, Jean," he said grimly.

I groped for the slippery soap, which had shot out of its container. I was speechless and trembling, whether with

fright or anger I could not tell. He waited in silence until I found my tongue.

"What are you doing here?"

"I might ask what *you* are doing here," he said coldly. "Wasn't Galway your destination?"

"I changed my plans."

"For what?"

"That's my business."

"Did you have to lie to me?"

"I didn't lie. I've seen Galway and Lough Corrib with Nick today."

"Don't split hairs. You lied."

"And what if I did? You are not my keeper."

"Why did you come, Jean?"

"You know all right. I came to find out the truth about you and Deirdre Lome and why she needed Adrian's help."

"So you know about Deirdre," he said slowly.

No fear now, only anger, as I said, "Yes, I know, in spite of your efforts to deceive me."

"Just what do you plan to do here?"

"Find out her address from the barman, and go and see her. I know she lives round here. She'll tell me the truth."

"I can tell you the truth."

"Do you think I'd believe you now?"

"Why not?"

I think if I had not worked myself up into such an emotional state during that interminable day, I should have noticed then his surprise and been warned, but I plunged recklessly on, embittered by the whole long sad business.

"You knew all the time why Adrian had come to Ireland. To try to help Deirdre out of some trouble you'd landed her in. And you pretended not to know, that he'd just come here on a holiday. You were trying to save your own face, I

suppose. And because of that, Adrian died. Do you think I'd believe another word from you? And now please get out of my room. I don't know how you found out where I was, but you're wasting your time. I'm going to get at the truth for myself."

"Why didn't you mention Deirdre to me after the accident?"

"Because immediately after the accident, I couldn't remember. And when I did, I couldn't think the name would mean anything to you."

"And you weren't concerned about her safety?"

"I knew that if Adrian was safe, she was, because they were together. He was looking after her. I was behind. We were separated. I expect he would have come back for me, but it was all so confused. And ever since, I've been plagued with doubts. That's what I can't forgive you for. That I should have doubted Adrian for one moment. That as well as having to bear his loss, I should have this festering doubt. I never wholly believed that there was anything between him and Deirdre, knowing him as well as I did, but I had to come here to find out the truth, and you won't stop me."

"Am I to conclude that I'm the villain in the piece, then?" he asked with a cold irony which infuriated me.

"It was despicable, to save your face like that."

"May I ask what leads you to suppose that I was in any way involved with Deirdre?"

"I saw the last page of a letter from her. You'd dropped it on the floor of the office last night. When I went in to tell you what I had in mind to do up here, I picked it up. And then I saw it all."

" 'All' being?"

"She was in love with you, and you'd finished with her. I don't know what she wanted from Adrian. Just some word

of your whereabouts, or some advice, I guess."

"And Adrian had to go to Ireland with her to give her that advice?"

"I know I haven't got all the story," I said, faltering. "But enough to know that you deliberately hid from me the explanation of Adrian's week in Ireland. You've never mentioned Deirdre Lome's name to me, and yet that letter made it quite clear that you and she were deeply involved. I suppose she filled in one of the holiday gaps between your work. Laura Fairmont put it in a nutshell. Men for work, women for distraction when needed and brushed off like a troublesome fly when work calls again. That was your creed, she said. And she was obviously speaking from experience."

"I see. So that's the picture, is it? And I'm supposed to have concealed all this from you just to save my face? Does that seem likely?"

"Well, I suppose it was on your conscience that if it hadn't been for you, Adrian would have been alive. You wouldn't want to admit that to me, I can see."

"What you can see is a whole lot of false pictures strung together on the flimsiest evidence so that I can be made the scapegoat for Adrian's failings."

"Adrian was honest and good and kind. And chivalrous. If Deirdre was shaken and suffering from shock after that accident, it was just like him to take her back to her home here. He knew I was in good hands in that hospital."

"Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?"

His irony was like a whip to a runaway horse and I plunged on.

"He had none of your ruthlessness or arrogance. He didn't use women for amusement in idle moments. Now please get out of my room. You have no right to follow me and dictate what I shall do. I'm going to see Deirdre tomorrow and find

out the whole truth, and nothing you can say or do will stop me."

"You won't see her, because she's in America."

I stared at him, then said coldly, "I can confirm that when I go to her home. And may I ask how you found out that I was at this hotel tonight? Do you have spies?"

"I met Tonie shopping in the village when I went to the post office this afternoon. Her shopping list was written on the back of an envelope which she handed to me to see if I could decipher a word in her aunt's difficult writing. It was a piece of fishing tackle her uncle wanted. On that envelope, in your writing, was the address of this hotel. Tonie said she'd taken it from the waste paper basket in her uncle's study. Nick had been using the telephone there, and she'd assumed it was one of his bookings for his tour. I thought I'd check up with the hotel. They confirmed that a Miss Lansford had booked a single room for two nights. Fortunately, they could book one for me tonight, too."

"Why? By what right do you dog me like a keeper?"

"Because before you go to the Lome farmhouse, you're going to hear the whole story from me. After that, you do as you like. And as I've done about six hours' non-stop motoring today after a stiff morning's work, and you're obviously not in a mood to pay reasonable attention to anything I say, I'm not going to embark on it tonight."

"When did you get here?"

"About five minutes before you. I suppose you got this address from Hugh Fairmont?"

"Yes, in spite of your efforts to shut him up. And I'm not interested in your version of the affair. I shall get what I want from other sources."

It was a cold, menacing stranger who stood up then, and I noticed for the first time that he had my suitcase at his

feet, which he now picked up.

"You're going to hear my version first, and since I don't now underestimate your skill at playing tricks on me, I'm going to make sure that you don't get away before me tomorrow. Hand over your car keys."

"You're mad," I said, anger almost choking me.

"Perhaps. I've got your clothes here. I'll return them first thing in the morning. But I'll have the car keys, too. I wouldn't put it past you to drive off just as you are," he said, eyeing my flimsy dressing-gown and slippers.

"If you think I'm going to submit to this crazy high-handedness, you're very much mistaken. I shall ring for the porter and have you put out."

"How very melodramatic! But this isn't that kind of hotel. There is no bell nor telephone for summoning the porter."

He had picked up my handbag and I went for him, trying to snatch it from him, but he held me off easily with one arm and pocketed the car keys. When I tried to stop him going to the door with the suitcase, he simply picked me up and threw me on the bed.

"Goodnight, Jean. I hope you'll have cooled off by tomorrow morning. You shall have the whole story then, and although you think me a liar, I fortunately have documents to prove the truth. After that, you won't be troubled by any interference from me, I promise you."

I stared blankly at the door after he had gone, and beneath the angry humiliation at being treated like a naughty child, beneath the fatigue, the storm of emotions, the puzzlement, ran a snake-like thread of fear that I had done some irreparable damage, and that this day's work would bear bitter fruit.

Chapter 10

REVELATIONS

I slept badly that night, tormented by my thoughts, and saw the first daylight creep into the room. After that, I fell into a heavy sleep of exhaustion and awoke to see my suitcase inside the door, but no car keys.

When I went downstairs, Darrel had already breakfasted and was paying his bill. His face was quite impassive when he saw me.

"Good morning, Jean. I'll wait in the car for you."

I nodded and went into the dining-room, but one piece of toast and marmalade and a cup of coffee was all that I could manage for breakfast.

Darrel was sitting in the driving seat of his car, studying a map, when I went out. He leaned across and opened the door for me.

"We'll drive up the hill for our little talk," he said with that same cold impassiveness.

I sat silent and stony beside him as he drove up the hill out of sight of the hotel and pulled off the narrow road on to a flat piece of grass. Ahead of us the mountain tops were lost in cloud, and the expanse of heather and grass round us glistened with the overnight rain. Its bitter-sweet smell came in through the open windows of the car. Ever afterwards, the tangy smell of moorland was to bring back that morning when I sat in the car with Darrel and learned the truth. The only sound just then was the mournful cry of a curlew. My

hands were clasped tightly in my lap and I waited, unable to break the silence.

"I'll cut the frills and be as brief as I can," said Darrel in a lawyer's voice. "Adrian met Deirdre Lome four years ago when we were on holiday here, and they fell passionately in love with each other. He asked her to marry him within weeks of their first meeting, but Deirdre was a Catholic and her family was fanatically hostile to non-Catholics and to all the English. Their family had suffered terribly in the past from the troubles here. To them, Oliver Cromwell still lives in every Englishman. It's probably difficult for you to realise how these hatreds can live on. Deirdre knew she would never get her father's permission to marry an Englishman. Here in Ireland, women are not as free as they are at home. Family ties are strong, the women are far more subject to them and to the influence of their Catholic priests. She is a good Catholic, and was a dutiful daughter. She tried and failed to reconcile her family and her beliefs to marriage with Adrian, and there were terrible rows that nearly drove the girl out of her mind. In the end Adrian had to admit defeat, and they agreed to part. He'd been coming backwards and forwards to Ireland whenever he could. Now she asked him not to come again. But they kept on writing to each other. Then he met you."

"He never mentioned her to me."

"It went too deep, and he honestly tried to put what he couldn't have out of his mind. He was fond of you. You got on well together. He knew that you loved him and needed him. He thought you would help him to forget. I was against it from the start, because while they kept up their correspondence it was obvious that he wouldn't forget, and it seemed unfair to you and the wrong basis for marriage."

"He might have forgotten, in time."

"Perhaps. To talk of a consuming passion seems like romantic exaggeration, but between Adrian and Deirdre it was like that."

"He was always so happy and carefree. How could I not have sensed it?"

"Adrian was always good at preserving a lively exterior. Underneath, he was a very serious person. And you, Jean, were not very experienced. You've always complained that I treated you like a child, but it was Adrian who did that to a far greater extent than I. He saw you as a deprived child, anxious to love, delighted with the affection he felt for you, and he thought he could make you happy and gain a pleasant enough home life for himself on the grave of his love for Deirdre. I told him it wouldn't work. That in the end it wouldn't satisfy either of you, and that you would be the biggest loser. He replied that the children you would have would fill any gaps. He could have been right."

I was twisting the engagement ring on my finger. So that was what it had meant. I no longer questioned that Darrel was telling me the truth.

"I was away in Nepal for some months, as you know. I hoped that Adrian might have cut off all communication with Deirdre as your wedding drew near. It could do neither of them any good. Then he telephoned me after the accident and told me about it. He only had a few minutes to spare. He was speaking from the airport, where he and Deirdre were waiting for a plane to Dublin. He couldn't explain then, but he would write me fully from Ireland, he said, and meanwhile would I keep an eye on you, and not say anything to you about Deirdre at this stage. He would be writing to you, too. He rang off before I could question him any further."

Darrel's dry voice never wavered. He glanced at me for

comment but I had nothing to say, and he went on.

"I received a letter from Adrian on the Thursday of that week. He explained that Deirdre had at last decided that she couldn't go on without him, and that she would go against her family and priest to marry him. She'd told her father that she was spending a holiday with her married sister in Dublin, and came to London to tell Adrian of her decision, but arrived just before he and you were going on that trip to Sweden. Adrian managed to get a berth for her and they decided to use that trip to make their plans and then break the news to you. But the accident had thrown that all out and he was now going to write to you. I won't go into the details of his letter to me because I've got it back at the hotel. I kept it in case there came a time when I thought you should see it. So you can read it for yourself. But briefly, their plan was to stay with Deirdre's sister in Dublin until Deirdre had got over the shock of the accident on top of everything else. Then she was going back home to tell her father, and leave. She refused to go without telling him, but she didn't want Adrian to appear on the scene, so he stayed at the hotel here on the Thursday night, and was to meet Deirdre the next morning at a rendezvous about a couple of miles from where she lived. Then they were going to be married as soon as possible. You know the rest. It was a misty morning, the mountain road was narrow and twisting."

"He was a good driver."

"His thoughts were probably not as concentrated on the job as they should have been. But it was difficult to find out exactly what happened. There was some talk of a rock fall blocking the road, which he wouldn't have seen in that thick mist."

"When you were here, after the accident, did you see

Deirdre?"

"Yes. I went to her home to find out more, and I met with a warm reception at that farmhouse. Deirdre looked like a ghost, her father like a mad prophet and her two brothers were obviously a dangerous, headstrong pair. While I was there the rows started up again. One of the brothers said that Adrian's death was God's work. Then Deirdre came to life. She asked her father if he endorsed that. He said he certainly did. Then she told them in a magnificent blaze of fury what she thought of them. The brother repeated what he'd said about Adrian, I knocked him down, and the other brother came at me with a knife. Fortunately, he only caught my hand, and his father held him off and gave me five minutes to get off their land. It was three to one. Deirdre asked me to wait for her by the church. It was about a mile off, and she came running across the fields lugging a case. She was quite determined. Deirdre is a gentle, sensitive girl, but she was like a tigress that day. I shan't forget her speech to her father and brothers. And I realised why Adrian loved her so much. She asked me to drive her to her sister's home in Dublin. She would get work there and save up enough money for her fare to America, where she had an aunt and uncle who would help her find her feet there. She couldn't live in Ireland any longer. It held too much grief for her. That letter you saw from her was the first I'd had since she sailed to America. You can check that, too, for verification."

"I had no letter from Adrian," I said mechanically.

"No. In his letter to me he said he'd made three attempts to write to you, and torn them up. He felt very guilty about it and said he'd decided to wait until he and Deirdre got back to England and then tell you. And would I stall meanwhile. He was sure you had no inkling of the connec-

tion between him and Deirdre, and he had introduced her as a chance acquaintance because he needed time, and you were obviously too seasick to pay attention just then. When you made no mention of her after the accident, I assumed that a degree of amnesia had wiped her out of your mind. And I decided then that you need never know. That it would be cruel to let you find out. That's why I scotched your tentative efforts to come back to the scene of the accident. It was local gossip, the whole affair. There are too few people here not to know what goes on in the locality. Your intention to visit Ireland made me a bit uneasy, though. I still don't understand why you didn't mention the girl to me."

"Because I couldn't bear to admit that Adrian had been unfaithful to me. I couldn't believe it. And to mention it to anybody would have seemed disloyal."

"You *did* have some inkling of what was between them, then, on the boat?"

"Not until the fire broke out. I ran to Adrian's cabin, and found it empty. There was so much noise, bells ringing, shouting crowds. I saw Adrian helping Deirdre up the stairs. I fought my way through the crowd to get to them. When I did manage to get near them and catch his arm, he shrugged my hand off without looking at me and I heard him say to Deirdre, 'Hold on to me. You'll be all right, my love.' He had no eyes or thought for me. I watched them struggling towards one of the lifeboats and I got swept off to another. I just went with the crowd and got pushed up against a stanchion. I didn't remember much after that."

"And yet you managed to convince yourself that I was the one involved with Deirdre."

"That letter . . ." I faltered.

"Well, it's wonderful what wishful thinking can do."

"I loved him, Darrel. And last night I was overwrought.

But he could just have been calming a panic-stricken girl. At least, that's what I tried to believe. I can only apologise to you. And I did think I had the right to investigate it myself."

"Well, you can understand now, perhaps, why I couldn't let you go off to the Lome farmhouse. Your reception there might have been less violent, but scarcely pleasant. They don't mince words there. Now I leave it with you. I'll confine my trustee's duties to business only in future, and since you'll be twenty-five in October, you won't even have to be burdened with my jurisdiction over that side of your affairs much longer."

"Please try to forgive me, Darrel." I wanted to say more, but his flinty attitude made it hard, and I was still shattered by his revelations, which made a mockery of all I had believed in.

"Let it rest. Your attitude to me has been pretty consistent over many years, after all. It was foolish of me to think you'd changed it lately. Just a momentary lapse in this country which is so conducive to romance," he said with a bitter irony that cut me like a whip.

If I hadn't seen that piece of notepaper in the office that night, I would have told him my plans and he would have explained then, and there would have been none of this bitterness, I thought, as I stared ahead at the misty mountains. Now misery, regret, guilt, held me captive. I could say nothing. Last night I had said too much. And if I apologised until doomsday, I couldn't wipe it out. He would never forgive me, and I couldn't blame him.

He fished in his pocket and handed me my car keys

"I'm driving back straightaway. You may remember I've a paper to write. You can walk back to the hotel. If you want to see where the accident happened, it was somewhere

along the last hairpin bend on the pass that starts a mile or so beyond the hotel. I'll see you on Monday morning."

"I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble and held up your work," I said miserably.

"That," he said grimly, "is the least of it."

I got out of the car, and he drove off without another word. I watched the car gather speed and disappear round the bend. I waited, and saw it climbing up the pass, a white blob against the green slope of the mountain. Then it had gone again. I waited for it to reappear on the final hairpin bend before the descent the other side, and then I walked slowly back to the hotel, half stunned by what I had learned, overwhelmed with desolation at what I had destroyed.

I drove up the mountain pass and saw where Adrian had lost his life. A narrow road, poised between a vertical drop to the rock-strewn valley below and the steep bare slope of the summit. It was raining and the wind was strong up there, rocking me as I stood beside the car looking down at the floor of the valley in a kind of last despairing tribute. Then, for it was not safe to have the car parked there, I drove back to the hotel. I spent the rest of the day walking round that deserted moorland country, wrapped in thoughts as bleak as death, seeing nothing of my surroundings, oblivious to weather. And that was the day I grew up.

* * *

When I arrived back at tea-time on Sunday, I found two letters on the dressing-table of my room, and sat down on the bed to read them. I had no need to confirm Darrel's story. I knew it was true. But I wanted to see if there was any crumb of comfort to be found in them for me, for I was weighed down with a sense of failure and rejection. Foolishly, perhaps because I was tired, my eyes filled with tears

at the sight of Adrian's hand-writing. I brushed them away and began to read.

Dear Darrel,

I'm sorry I couldn't stop to explain more on Saturday. Deirdre turned up on the eve of my trip to Sweden to say that she couldn't go on, that she would throw everything up and marry me, if I still wanted that. If I wanted that! She was shaken, but determined, although the agony of making the decision had left her utterly exhausted. I couldn't leave her in that state, and booked her a berth on our boat. It seemed a good opportunity to get things straightened out. But Jean was badly seasick—it was a rough passage—and I couldn't inflict anything on her then. To give us time to make plans, I introduced Deirdre as a chance acquaintance, but my dear Jean was beyond taking anything in. I feel so guilty about that. You were right. I shouldn't have used her to help me forget Deirdre, but I honestly thought we would make a reasonable go of it. I'm very fond of Jean and we get on well together, but of course for me there has only ever been one woman.

The shock of the fire on top of everything else left Deirdre pretty weak and I brought her back to her sister's in Dublin, where we are staying for a few days. I'm driving her home on Thursday. She insists on going back to tell them, but I'm going to stay at a hotel a few miles off. Having met that hot-headed family of hers, I know I can do no good there and Deirdre wants me to keep off the scene. She'll join me on Friday morning and we shall come back straight away and get married by special licence.

You will think this very heartless where Jean is concerned, and it is, and I'd give anything not to have hurt her like this. Anything but Deirdre. This is something we can

neither of us help. I have made three attempts to write to Jean, and failed. Now I think it better to wait until we get back and tell her then, when she will have got over the effects of that nightmare at sea. Thank you for keeping an eye on her, and meanwhile please stall about my affairs.

I'll see you as soon as we get back. Ireland is as beguiling as ever. Remember the day we climbed Mount Brandon? They were good holidays. No hard feelings, I hope. Nothing you can say will make me feel more guilty than I do about Jean. Help her if you can. She's very young and inexperienced. Younger than her years. My concern must seem hypocritical. So it is, I suppose, since I can't feel anything but deeply thankful and happy at the miracle of Deirdre's return to me.

I'll ring you on Saturday.

Yours,
Adrian.

So there it was, I thought, as I put the letter down on the bed. I simply hadn't counted in the scale against Deirdre. And although I knew it with my mind now, perhaps in my heart I had known it ever since Adrian had shepherded Deirdre through that seething mass of people without a backward glance for me. And all my happiness and hopes and dreams of the year before had rested on a paper foundation. What I had thought was his love for me had merely been the protective affection of a kindly man for an immature girl.

I picked up Deirdre's letter. There were only two flimsy sheets.

Dear Darrel,

Just to let you know that my aunt and uncle gave me a very warm welcome, and that I have started training to be a

nurse. It is all very strange and I find it hard to get used to the noise and bustle, but perhaps it is a good thing not to have time for reflection. I shall work hard to make myself qualified to be of service to others now.

I do not know your address so I am sending this care of the Horticultural Station, as you suggested. It occurs to me that in all that terrible time, I did not thank you adequately for your kindness. That and your generosity in giving me the money Adrian left, which legally was yours, I shall never forget. How can I ever forget any of it. The love, the cruelty, the way it ended. It will stay with me all my life. But I can pray. Please, Darrel, write sometimes. I shouldn't like to feel that all contact was lost. Leave me that one small link.

Deirdre.

How capricious life was, I thought, as I rested the pages on my lap. If I had only seen the first page, I would never have gone off without telling Darrel, and the bridge between us would have remained intact. Capricious and cruel. And I had made a sorry business infinitely worse. There was no comfort from either of those letters. Where human relationships were concerned, I was an abject failure all along the line.

Chapter 11

PATCHING UP

As though in tune with our change of mood, the weather during the weeks that followed remained unsettled, with days of soft rain interspersed with the odd day of glorious sunshine to remind us of the early months. But the carefree happiness of those golden months had vanished. Darrel confined himself to work, and his attitude was so business-like that I expected him to start addressing me as Miss Lansford at any moment. He spent what leisure he had alone, and was quite unapproachable except on a business level. It would have been a help to have Nick's easy presence around the hotel just then.

Antonia bemoaned Darrel's absence one Saturday in August when we were out walking for the day. We were exploring a path up one of the mountain valleys, and after days of rain, sunshine was with us again.

"Why doesn't Darrel ever come with us now? I haven't set eyes on him for weeks."

"He's very busy. He's aiming to return at the beginning of September, and wants to get his report finished and checked by then. And we're getting quite a lot of stuff to deal with from the Horticultural Station now."

"Well, he might remember his friends from time to time."

Her usually bright face looked unhappy, and I wondered whether Nick was right in his diagnosis of a slight attack of hero-worship. We were apt to dismiss other people's feelings

too lightly, I thought.

"Have you heard from Nick?" I asked.

"One brief postcard. Somehow, this holiday's gone a bit flat. I miss Nick, and Darrel. And the weather's not helped. I suppose it was too much to expect it to last."

"Cheer up. The sun's shining today, anyway. I'm going to get a picture of this valley. If you'll go and sit on that rock, you'll add a nice touch of human interest."

The stream cascading down a twisting course from the mountain ahead was sparkling and clear. The floor of the valley was a pattern of small viridian green fields divided by low stone walls and gorse hedges. There were three white farmhouses in view, a few cows grazing, some sheep with their well-grown lambs on the lower slope of a mountain, and a brown donkey near the rock on which Antonia had obediently clambered. The steep sides of the mountains ahead enclosed the valley on three sides. It was a peaceful, beautiful scene and I took pains with my exposure and focusing. It would remind me of happy days, and unhappy ones, of chances missed, and friends made, of pain and passion in this island of rich colour and beauty, with its saints and heroes, its romance and its hatred, and its soft magic.

As we walked on, I thought again of that remote farmhouse and Deirdre. Here in the south, where the people were so friendly and lively, it was easy to forget the dark tragedy of Irish history and the sufferings of the past. The poverty, not so apparent now, and the bravery. I was beginning now to see Deirdre's tragedy and my own part in that three-cornered pattern in better perspective. And Adrian and Deirdre were the biggest losers. Her love for Adrian went far beyond mine in intensity, for I realised now that I had loved Adrian with the happy simplicity of a child, without

passion, perhaps because I was immature, perhaps because for Adrian passion lay elsewhere. It might have grown between us, with marriage, if he had been able to forget Deirdre. I could not tell. But the force of the feeling that had flared up between Darrel and me had opened my eyes to what had been lacking before. And the whole tragedy had been caused by the bigotry and hatred that burned on in Deirdre's family. It seemed to me then that nothing was more important in life, more badly needed, than kindness and tolerance.

"Just look at those calves. Do take a photograph of them," said Antonia, gazing fondly at four calves huddled together, fast asleep in the sunshine, right in the middle of a field.

I did so, and we walked on up the sunny valley, then began to climb. We stopped on a high slope to watch some peat-cutters at work, slicing through peat to a depth of four or five feet and stacking it nearby. At the foot of the peat wall was water the colour of milkless tea. When I took a photograph of them, they waved cheerily and shouldered their long-handled spades like soldiers. It was hard to reconcile this Ireland with the dark passions of that remote farmhouse in Connemara.

And so the last weeks of our stay in Ireland ran out in something of an anticlimax. When Nick returned to his uncle's house at the end of August, I tried to organise one last day out together for Antonia's sake, but Darrel said he couldn't spare the time, and Nick and Antonia and I went off together to explore the one part of our peninsula which was unknown to us. It was a glorious day, and I tried hard to bring life to the party, but it was hard work. Nick seemed unusually preoccupied, and Antonia had quite lost her effervescence.

We found a quiet bay for our picnic, and Antonia wandered off along the edge of the sea on her own afterwards. Nick, lounging beside me on the sand, looked after her and said,

"What's biting Tonie?"

"End of holiday blues. And singular neglect by Darrel."

"I gather his nibs is working against time just now. I met him in the village last night. Definitely not in holiday mood any more."

"He's had to cut our stay short. We shall be going back two days after you. He's at last got permission from the owner to have access to the site of the new Horticultural Station for planning purposes."

Nick looked at me thoughtfully. In pale grey slacks, a lavender-coloured silk shirt over them and a paisley patterned cravat in toning colours knotted at his neck, he looked as elegant as ever. He was pleased with his research in the Joyce and Yeats country, and was ready now to start work on his book. I was thinking how enviably simple and untroubled his life seemed when he said lightly,

"I suppose you wouldn't want to make any advance on that friendship deal we made?"

Startled, I was at a loss for a moment.

"Why, would you?"

"That's no answer."

"You're serious?"

His eyes met mine.

"Very," he said.

"What about that cage you intend to avoid? What about that light touch?"

"Those leopard's eyes of yours have been haunting me. For you, I might risk it, Jean."

I smiled and shook my head as I said, "Dear Nick. But

the risk wouldn't be worth it. I've only friendship to offer. A very fond friendship. Not enough."

"Anyone else, or still in mourning?"

"In a way, yes to both."

He took my hand, and, as so often before, I was surprised at his quick intuition.

"You're unhappy. Anything I can do?"

"No, but thank you, Nick. My troubles are of my own making. And I'm the only one who can unmake them, if that's possible, which I doubt. I've not been very bright."

"You're all right. Take things too much to heart. Did you find out what you wanted in Connemara?"

"Yes. I've come to the conclusion that I've no gift for love. I don't recognise it when I see it, and I think I recognise it when all the time it's something else."

"Why not give me a run, then?"

"As a friend, more than a run. But that's all, Nick. Like you, I don't enjoy hurting people, and I've done enough damage lately. I shall remain a spinster," I went on lightly, "and you shall be my favourite bachelor, and we'll meet often and put the literary world to rights and congratulate ourselves on avoiding the pains of love. That will be much the happiest course for us, you know."

"Perhaps," he said, smiling, and following my lead. "I'm certainly not cut out for the domestic life, and you're not cut out for the Bohemian life, so we'll do as you say. If the red rose is a falcon and the white rose is a dove, what goes for me, Jean? A blinking owl?"

"I've always been very partial to owls," I said, smiling and giving him a chaste kiss on his forehead.

"So be it. And if you do get married, kindly see that your husband isn't one of those possessive types that frowns on male friends for his wife, because I intend to remain

attached."

"And so you shall, come hell or high water."

The falcon and the dove, I thought. Darrel and Adrian. And I had lost them both.

Three nuns were walking along the beach towards us, their black gowns billowing in the breeze. They were laughing as they battled with their skirts. Two were quite young and very pretty. The third was older but no less vivacious. They smiled as they came level with us and stopped to hand us one of our towels which had blown away.

"And isn't it a grand day?" said the older sister.

We agreed and she went on to ask us where we were staying and if we liked Ireland. Our replies caused smiles all round.

"Sure, it's a lovely place. And have you see the Italian garden? Paradise."

"Yes, it's out of this world. But so is Killarney," I said, and just saying the word gave me a pang.

"Those rhododendrons and azaleas. Do you think, now, we could grow those in County Clare?"

My work with Darrel had taught me enough to say,

"It's doubtful, if County Clare is limestone, as I think it is. Those shrubs need an acid soil."

"As I thought." Her smile was piercingly sweet as she went on, "And you haven't seen Ireland if you've not been to County Clare. The wild Atlantic breakers. The rugged coast."

We chatted for a little, then they wished us good weather for the rest of our stay and went on their way, smiling and talking, the breeze still sporting with their robes. They seemed wonderfully happy. My eyes followed them as they walked along the firm sand close to the white foam of the breakers, three black and white galleons under sail, until

they disappeared round the end of the bay.

"You're a lazy pair," said Antonia, coming up behind us. "Aren't you going to have a swim?"

"Not I," said Nick promptly, and rolled up a towel for a pillow.

"Well, perhaps you're right. The wind's a bit nippy," said Antonia with unwonted lack of zest as she flopped down beside me.

I made a quick decision.

"Darrel and I want you and Nick to come and have dinner with us tomorrow night, just to round off the holiday. Hope you can make it."

Nick cocked an enquiring eyebrow at me, then said he'd be delighted. Antonia's face had come to life and she said eagerly,

"Me, too. I was afraid Darrel had written us off."

"Far from it," I said, determined that I would drag Darrel to that dinner by the short hairs, if necessary. "And as you're going home from Cork, we'd like to come and see you off," I went on, in for a penny, in for a pound.

"I hope we can all keep in touch," she said. "It's been such fun together."

"Of course we shall," I said firmly, and meant it.

"Where will you be living?" she asked.

"Probably at a small residential hotel in Ellarton. I know the owner, and I'm waiting to hear if she can take me."

"Oh good! Ellarton's not far from my home at Melbridge. Only four stations down the line," she said eagerly.

"In the heart of our family settlements. All along that railway line various members of our tribe join the train on their way up to London each day, and are dropped off each evening like cards dealt from a pack," drawled Nick.

"But not you," I pointed out.

"No. I left the pack for London years ago, and we have a few renegades in Northumberland. But the bulk of the clan live in that ten-mile square of Surrey, and no Scottish chieftain ever held stronger sway over the clan than my grandmother. A phenomenon in this day and age."

"Where will Darrel be living?" asked Antonia with a casual air that deceived nobody.

"At the new Horticultural Station in Sussex, I expect, although whether he's going straight there on his return, I don't know. The accommodation may not be ready for him."

"Well, if you're not going to swim, I think I'll walk a little way along the cliff," said Antonia.

She seemed to want to be on her own, so I did not offer to join her.

"Sad case," murmured Nick, adjusting the rolled up towel more comfortably behind his head and shutting his eyes.

* * *

Since that disastrous trip to Connemara, Darrel had taken to coming in late for his meals so that we rarely overlapped. The hotel served lunches and dinners over a period of two hours, so that avoidance was not difficult. That evening I went down late, too. He stood up politely when I joined him, and asked me if I'd had a good day.

"Yes, thanks. Darrel, I've invited Nick and Tonie to dinner tomorrow night as our guests."

He digested this, his eyes studying me with the cool detachment to which I had become accustomed but not resigned. Then he said briefly,

"Right. They go on Saturday, don't they?"

"Yes. Sailing from Cork. I said we'd see them off, too."

"You're assuming rather a lot, aren't you?"

"No. They are our friends. Cork isn't far. I don't approve of blowing hot and cold with friends, according to one's mood."

"That being aimed at me, I take it."

"Yes."

"I didn't come here for a holiday."

"That's no answer."

"I can't think that my presence on the quay on Saturday will make all that difference to Nick and Tonie, and I'm working against time just now."

"The boat sails at eight-thirty in the morning. We could do it in little over an hour, and be back by ten. I shall go in any case, but I think it would be appreciated if you came, too, especially by Tonie. But I was trained to the discipline that work comes before people, so if you refuse to come, I shan't be surprised."

"Have you any right to say that to me?" he asked quietly.

I remembered how he had come after me to save me from damage at the hands of Deirdre's family at a time when he really was working to a tight schedule.

"No, I have no right. I'm sorry, Darrel."

He waited until the waitress had served his cheese and biscuits, then said calmly,

"I'll come and see them off, but don't ever again commit me to anything before consulting me."

I concentrated on my roast duck, wondering miserably how I could break through his cold detachment. I couldn't even make him angry now. The only other remark he addressed to me during that meal was to the effect that he'd made some revisions to the last two pages of his report and would I re-type them tomorrow so that he could post the completed typescript off to the publishers on Saturday and

forget it. He had other things on his mind now. Then, his cheese finished, he asked me to excuse him, and left to have his coffee in the lounge. By the time I got there, he had disappeared.

We were leaving on Monday. I wanted desperately to get through to him before we left and separated, but could not find the way. He was as unapproachable as a minefield.

He did exert himself to be pleasant at our little dinner party the next evening, however. Antonia, looking as bright as a May morning in a pale-green dress that went well with her red hair, responded to his gentle teasing with a warmth in her wide hazel eyes that would have melted an iceberg. He was good with her, I thought. Not too familiar to lead her on, not too detached to hurt her. He was too experienced not to know as well as I that she was half in love with him, and first love needed careful handling. Just so had he handled me when I was young and green, but with me he had brought more authority to bear than he did with Antonia. A trustee. And I had rebelled against that element. Perhaps because I felt so unsure of myself, after years of rejection that had left as a legacy a foolish pride to salve my humiliation. Now I knew myself better, but I had grown up too late, perhaps.

It was a good evening, and hoping that it might have had a mellowing effect on Darrel, I sought him out afterwards.

"Darrel, can we have a few minutes together? There's something I want to say to you."

"Sure. The lounge is empty. Another drink?"

I refused, and he lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair, watching me.

"Darrel," I said desperately, "isn't there some way of patching things up between us?"

"I thought they were patched up. Personally, I've never been keen on half measures."

"I know it must be hard for you to forgive me, but I am deeply sorry."

"No need to be troubled by a guilty conscience, Jean. You are quite entitled to your own opinion of me. You've had enough years to form it, after all. When it came to the crunch between Adrian and me, I had to be the guilty one. I quite understand. Say no more about it."

How much did it matter to him, I wondered. Was he now more than ready to write me off and get down to the world of work and men? Was he deeply hurt? Or was it just a holiday love affair that had been nipped by frost before it could become more? Had he ever meant it to become more? I closed my eyes, suddenly weary. I had supped too full of emotion in the past six months, I thought. I had nearly lost my life in a fire at sea, I had seen the man I was about to marry forget me entirely in his concern for another at a time of crisis, I had gone through the grief of his death, and been stirred by passion for another man, only to learn that the engagement which had been my whole life had a paper foundation and to quench that new love by my own stupidity. It was all too much in too short a time. If I had blundered, it was because I had been thrown off balance by these assaults on my emotions. I needed time to sort myself out, and then perhaps I would stop blundering. One thing was obvious. Darrel would not help me. He had withdrawn his support, and it was not until now when I had lost it that I realised what it had meant to me. It had always been there, in the background. Now it felt cold without it.

"I'm on my own now, then," I said, half to myself.

"That's what you wanted."

"Perhaps it was necessary. One grows up, painfully."

"Are you going back to London?"

"No. I haven't made any plans, but I don't want to go back to London. The past is dead. I'm thinking of staying for the time being at a small hotel in Ellarton. The woman who owns it was once our housekeeper. One of the many when I was too young for the job, but she was the nicest, and we kept in touch. She left us when she inherited this house from an uncle and turned it into a residential hotel."

Ellarton had been the nearest town to our Surrey village and I had gone there once a week to shop when I kept house for my father. It all seemed so long ago.

"Is it actually fixed?"

"I'm waiting to hear from Mrs. Goring. I expected a letter today."

"Cutting it a bit fine."

"Yes. Bringing our stay here to an end so quickly rather caught me on the hop, and I haven't been in the mood for planning ahead."

"There are several hotels of that kind in Ellarton. Will you be getting a job locally?"

"I hope so."

"Well, you'll have your father's legacy coming to you in October, so you don't have to worry about money. I can advance some if needed."

"Thanks, I've enough to manage. And that reminds me. I'm glad you gave Deirdre the money that Adrian left."

"It was what he would have wished. It only came to me because he'd not made a will and I was the next of kin. Both you and Deirdre had better claims, but between the two of you I decided that Deirdre had first claim, because she would have been his wife. It didn't amount to much, but enough to help her start a new life in America."

"You were right," I said, inwardly wincing. He was not

being protective any longer.

"Well, as you've committed us to an early start tomorrow, I'm for bed," he said, getting to his feet. "We'll leave at seven sharp. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Darrel."

As I watched him cross the room, I realised that there was no more I could do then to mend the breach. I needed time to make sure of myself, to think it all through again. We were too much under each other's feet. An interval apart might be the best thing for both of us. But once swallowed up by his new appointment, Darrel would be unlikely to spare any time for a girl who had caused him a lot of trouble and shown little gratitude even if in his arms she had once promised more. And that thought was as bleak as a January morning.

Chapter 12

GOODBYES

The sun was shining as we stood on the quay of Cork harbour and waved to Nick and Antonia as the boat drew away. Their uncle and aunt had come to see them off, too.

"I shall miss Tonie so much," said Mrs. Mendyp. "She's made me feel young again. And Nick. But they've both taken to Ireland, and I'm sure they'll be coming again."

Antonia was waving her handkerchief with indefatigable vigour, and would go on doing so, I was sure, until we were invisible. Nick, leaning on the rail beside her, lifted a hand in an elegant royal salute every now and again, his hair the colour of ripe barley in the sun. I was sorry to see them go, too.

In two days' time, Darrel and I would be sailing from Rosslare. And that would be the end of our golden summer in Ireland. Nick had been right. We should none of us ever be quite the same again. We had all shared wonderful, happy hours. And we had all got our fingers burned, to a greater or lesser extent. And we should none of us forget this beautiful, spell-binding country.

The water widened between us, and now only the bright splash of Antonia's hair marked them out on the deck, with the waving handkerchief a tiny white blob.

"Well, I shall cheer myself up with some shopping in Cork and a good lunch," declared Mrs. Mendyp. "I know Darrel's got to get back, but if he can spare you, why not

stay and spend the day here with us, Jean?"

"Good idea," said Darrel. "Cork's a fascinating town, and the Cobh's worth a day itself. You ought to see more of it before we go, Jean."

I wondered whether his approval of the idea might owe something to a desire not to have me as his passenger on the return journey. However, I was glad of the opportunity to see more of the place, which looked delightful on that sunny morning, and so Darrel went off and we enjoyed a leisurely day, poking round the quays and narrow streets, doing a little shopping, and driving after lunch to visit Blarney Castle. Perhaps I should have kissed the Blarney Stone there to give me the necessary eloquence to break down Darrel's cool reserve towards me, but I contented myself with the fine view of the surrounding countryside from the roof of the castle.

I found Nick's uncle and aunt pleasant company, and just what I needed to keep painful thoughts at bay. They dropped me back at the hotel that evening in good time for dinner.

Darrel, as usual now, came down late and I was in the lounge drinking my coffee when he came through and stopped to ask me if I'd enjoyed the day. I assured him that I had, and he said, "Good", and went in to the dining-room. When he came out I was still sitting there, resolutely doing nothing so that he should have no excuse for not joining me. I was conscious that we had so little time now.

"I'm skipping coffee tonight," he said. "I've a stack of typing ready for you. Do you think you could make an early start tomorrow in an effort to get it cleared up before we leave?"

"Of course. I've nothing else to do, except pack."

"Thanks." He was looking at my left hand. "You've taken

off your engagement ring."

"Yes. It was meaningless, wasn't it? It always was meaningless, I suppose. A child's ring," I said bitterly.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"And now we have put away childish things."

His eyes flickered over me. His expression was austere. I could read nothing from it. Then he said,

"If you'll excuse me, I just want to clear up a few things in the office."

I stared after him blankly. Then I fetched my coat and went out for a walk along the river, to be mocked by another evening by the river when he had taken me in his arms and told me that I had passed the point of no return.

I was at the typewriter all the next day and cleared all the work by seven that evening. Standing by the window, looking down at the car-park, I was remembering how I had seen the Fairmonts arguing there, and all that had followed, when Darrel came in and collected the work.

"Thanks, Jean," he said. "Don't bother about packing up here. I'll see to it all after dinner. We shall have to be away early in the morning. Six at the latest. Can't risk missing the boat. I'll ask Molly to fill the flask with coffee and cut a few sandwiches which we can have on the way."

The boat sailed from Rosslare at noon, and there was to be no taking an extra day and stopping half-way for Darrel. It was as though he could not bring this holiday to a close quickly enough. Work? Or the desire to get away from me? I could not tell. I could not tell anything about Darrel's thoughts now. He had closed the shutters. I could not blame him. After the words I had hurled at him in the hotel bedroom that night, his attitude was admirable in its restraint. He was polite, impersonal and reasonable in every way. And I knew it would have been better if he had paid

me back in my own coin. It would have released both of us from this constraint, and I should at least have known how he felt, whether he really cared or whether he had written me off without much pain.

As the work had made me late for dinner, we overlapped, and Darrel talked about Cork most of the time, my efforts to turn the conversation to anything more personal being politely blocked. We had coffee together, and I summoned up enough resolution to say,

"How about a last walk to the sea? It's going to be a lovely sunset."

"Afraid I've too much packing to do."

"Do we have to behave like strangers?" I blurted out.

He raised his eyebrows with an ironical expression which made me angry and said coolly,

"Isn't that what you want? And have wanted for years?"

"How can you say that after . . ."

"Go on."

But I couldn't find the words, and he used his own for what had passed between us.

"Sexual attraction can exist without liking. You must know that by now."

He might have been a sociologist lecturing a backward student, and I flushed as it struck home. But, in the light of what had happened, I supposed he had reason to say it. I had shown little trust and no liking on the night of the showdown. Logic was on his side, and he was nothing if not logical. I looked down at my hands feeling helpless and angry and unhappy, and found nothing to say.

"Don't look so guilty," he went on drily. "You don't have to apologise for that. You didn't even try to mislead me. You showed your reluctance to surrender to that trap. I should have known better. Your innate resentment of me has old

roots. I hadn't realised quite how strong it was and how eagerly you would welcome justification for it."

"I've said how sorry I am about that."

"I know. That settles it. Now let's forget it. As I said, there's no need to feel guilty. Our likes and dislikes where people are concerned are often instinctive and can't be analysed away. Now please let it rest. And don't be so muddle-headed as to want to paper it over with 'Let's-pretend-it-never-happened'. It's stupid and irritating and hypocritical."

"You have it all clear, haven't you? With your scientist's logic. Are feelings so easily plotted on squared paper into a neat pattern?" I said angrily.

"Nothing that you've said or done suggests that my pattern is wrong. I go by facts and actions, not muddled, emotional moods. I'm trying to behave in a civilised manner for the rest of this trip. Perhaps you'd do the same. Easier all round. When we get back and go our separate ways it will all seem different, no doubt. Ireland has a way of stirring up sentimental emotions."

We had been alone in the lounge, but some more guests came in and Darrel said goodnight and left me. I went for my last look at the sunset over the bay and found it heartbreakingly beautiful. The sea was silkily calm and the mountains seemed to swim in a rosy-purple haze against the darkening sky. I was sorry I had tried to paper over the cracks. My earlier realisation that I needed time to think it all through again—Adrian, Deirdre, Darrel—had been right. Too much had happened too quickly for me. That I had blundered disastrously was apparent. That I had destroyed the reality for the dream was a cause of bitter remorse. But whether I could build anything on the wreckage, whether I really knew what I wanted to build—those were matters that

needed time and heart-searching and wisdom, if I possessed any, which I was beginning to doubt.

And so I was as civilised as Darrel on the long drive back across Ireland to Rosslare, and things were made easier thereafter by the fact that Darrel ran into a friend on board. Somebody who served on some conservation committee with him. Darrel introduced him. I didn't grasp his surname but Darrel called him Stuart, and Stuart he remained to me. When the two men went down to the bar for a drink, I elected to stay on deck and see the last of Ireland disappear.

It was a bright day, with a lively sea, and visibility was excellent, so that I stood for a long time against the rail watching the coastline recede. Whatever had happened, I should always be grateful for this summer which had introduced me to a country which now held me in its thrall. It had moved me as no other landscape ever had. It had given me golden, happy days which I should always remember. It had brought me two new friends, and lost me an old one. It had destroyed a dream and shown me a reality I was too fearful to grasp. And it had, painfully, taught me a lot. Although the future looked grey and difficult, dogged with regrets, I should carry with me always the haunting beauty of Ireland, and one day I would come back.

Chapter 13

ROAD BLOCKED

I found my bed-sitting-room in Mrs. Goring's hotel a comfortable and quiet base. With the exception of one elderly widow, the other residents were business people and we saw little of each other except at meal times. I took on a temporary job in a bookshop in Ellarton until I could decide just what I wanted to do. I was lonely and troubled and my thoughts dwelt constantly on Darrel, but it did give me what I badly needed, a time for reflection on my own without the pressure of other people's personalities. I needed to stand off, and find my bearings. Then, perhaps, I should see more clearly how to mend that bridge.

I heard nothing from Darrel until my birthday in October, when I received a note with an accompanying statement of my financial position and a cheque for eight hundred and fifty pounds. The note said,

Dear Jean,

I am attaching a full statement of your financial position. It will take some time to effect the transfers of your shares but you will receive the Share Certificates in due course. I also enclose a cheque for the cash which has been held on deposit for you.

I think I have made everything quite clear on the statement, but if you have any queries don't hesitate to let me know.

Now that I no longer enjoy your trust, if indeed I ever did, I won't offer myself as your adviser any longer, but I do urge you to put your affairs in the hands of a competent accountant. I give the name and address of my own accountant below, in case you have no other ideas.

Best wishes for your birthday.

Yours,
Darrel.

The hurt that lay behind those formal businesslike lines called for something more than a formal acknowledgment from me. I ran my eyes over the statement, which was very detailed. As I knew nothing about stocks and shares, it was all rather confusing and would have to wait until I had more leisure to study it, but I gathered that I was the possessor of investments to the value of about five thousand pounds.

I put the papers away and dashed off to the bookshop. That evening, I wrote to Darrel. It took me a long time.

Dear Darrel,

Thank you for your letter and cheque, and the statement of my affairs. I would like to come and see you about this when you can spare the time.

You are quite wrong to say that you do not enjoy my trust, if we must write like lawyers. I do trust you absolutely, and always have, in spite of one hysterical attack at a moment of stress, for which I have apologised. I realise that I'm fortunate to have had my affairs in your hands and I'm truly grateful for all the trouble you have taken on my behalf.

I know you're a very busy person and will doubtless be relieved to be rid of that task now. Otherwise I would ask you to advise me in the future. But of course I shall quite

understand if you want to be rid of all responsibility, in which case I will certainly take your advice about an accountant and write to the one you recommend. But before doing that, I'd like to discuss one or two things with you.

I sat back and read this through. What had happened, that we had to write to each other in such stilted terms? However, having firmly handed myself back to him to accept or reject, I tried to come off the stilts.

I have celebrated my birthday by spending part of the money you sent me on a second-hand Mini from the owner of the bookshop where I am working on a temporary basis. It had to be a quick decision as he had another willing buyer, but that I think I have a good bargin because my employer is an extremely nice, honest person. The car was his wife's. She's given up driving. Lost her nerve. So with transport at my disposal, I can come and see you any time at the weekend or in the evening that would be convenient for you. I hope you will not see this hasty purchase as proof that I am in greater need of guidance even than you thought.

I hope the new project is going well.

Yours,
Jean.

I don't know quite what response I expected from Darrel to this epistle, but the one thing I did not expect was to be ignored. But ten days passed and I had no reply.

Nick had invited me to have dinner with him in London on the day his book was published. I enjoyed the evening and managed to push Darrel into the background of my mind until Nick said casually,

"I see Darrel's giving a talk at some conservation conference in your part of the world tomorrow. Are you going?"

"I didn't know. Where?"

"Bainford. I happened to see it mentioned in a magazine."

"I'd like to go. Do you remember the time and meeting place?"

"Sorry. But I'll look it up when I get back tonight and give you a ring in the morning if you like. I'd come myself, but I've a date."

"Thanks, Nick. I'd be glad if you would. And here's wishing you marvellous sales and splendid reviews," I said, lifting my glass of wine to him.

It was a cool, fine night and he walked to Charing Cross Station with me. I had not felt quite confident enough to drive to London in my car, for although I had been driving over a number of years, my experience since my father's death had been limited, and I had never driven in London traffic. Arm-in-arm we passed the fountains playing in Trafalgar Square and the floodlit National Gallery, seeing London at its best on that fine autumn night when a crescent moon could hardly compete with the lights below. We had got on to books and writers, as usual, and we were still talking when my train drew out and my case in favour of an old-fashioned writer was only half made.

I was conscious of feeling better for the evening as I withdrew from the window and settled myself into a corner seat. Everything was always so easy with Nick. Why couldn't I love him instead of that troublesome, formidable man, Darrel Brynton?

The conference hall was crowded on that Friday evening and I only just managed to get a seat at the back. I opened the leaflet I had been given. There was a typewritten slip attached to it. Owing to an accident, it said, Dr. Darrel Brynton was unable to attend but his paper would be read

by Dr. T. H. Fareham. Tom Fareham was, I knew, Darrel's right hand man at the new Station. I was round behind the scenes in the space of seconds enquiring for him, and tracked him down drinking a cup of coffee in a quiet corner and glancing through some sheets of typescript. He was a heavily built man of about thirty with sandy hair and a blunt, pleasant face. I explained that I was an old friend of Dr. Brynton and had known nothing about any accident and was anxious to find out what had happened. I must have looked scared, for he patted my shoulder in a fatherly way as he said,

"He'll live. Broken collar-bone, damaged ribs. He's in hospital, but raring to get out. He was lucky, considering that a lorry backed into some old brick stables he and a surveyor were looking over and brought the whole ramshackle place down on them. The surveyor was luckier still. A beam protected him from anything worse than bruising."

"Which hospital?"

"Deanswood Cottage Hospital. Quite near Fenton Grange, fortunately. But whether he'll be there tomorrow I don't know. He's been threatening to discharge himself this weekend, but they want to keep him until the specialist has studied the X-rays to make sure there's no internal injury. If I were you, I'd telephone Miss Cherriton at Fenton Grange in the morning. She was going to see Darrel this afternoon and will be up to date. Now, if you'll excuse me, Miss . . ."

"Lansford."

"Not Dr. Stephen Lansford's daughter?"

"Yes."

"I thought I'd seen you before. You picked me up one wet morning when you were driving your father to the Station. I was then a very minor lab assistant. I was struck dumb by your father noticing me. He was always wrapped

up in a world of his own."

"True enough."

"Some brain, though." He shuffled his papers together. "I shan't make nearly such a good job of this as Darrel would. I lack his compelling manner. Don't worry. He's a tough nut. More than a match for a few bricks."

He waved his papers at me and hurried off in the direction of the platform. But I was worried and I went straight out and telephoned the hospital, being more concerned with the conversation of Darrel than that of our environment at that moment.

The cool voice at the other end informed me that Dr. Brynton was comfortable and that they could not say when he would be discharged. I asked about visiting hours, and determined to go and see him the next afternoon. I never trusted the stereotyped information handed out by hospitals to telephone enquirers.

I rang his secretary at Fenton Grange Horticultural Station the next morning, and was given a much more detailed picture. The clipped, precise voice of Miss Cherriton did not hide the fact that she was trying to cope with an almost impossible situation.

"Dr. Brynton is the world's worst patient, and, of course, this has come at a most unfortunate time for him when he's really indispensable here. I act as courier, but we have only a skeleton staff just now and things are a little difficult."

"Can I help in any way? My father used to work at the Station and I've recently been doing some work for Dr. Brynton, so I do have some knowledge of what goes on."

"My main worry is that Dr. Brynton may insist on discharging himself tomorrow. He's been chafing these past few days and he and Matron are on very chilly terms indeed. I've tried to persuade him to wait until they say he

can leave, but with little effect. And what worries me more than anything," went on Miss Cherriton with a grim note in her voice, "is that his house here is simply not fit for anyone to live in, let alone someone recovering from injuries."

"Why is that?"

"It had been neglected and left in a bad state. I obtained a housekeeper who has turned out to be a dead loss. Dr. Brynton told me to get rid of her while he was away, but we've had no luck with getting a replacement. I'm at my wits' end to know what to do."

"Look here, shall I come over this morning and have a talk with you? I may be able to help. I was going to drive over this afternoon to see Dr. Brynton anyway. I'll come to the Station this morning and have a chat with you first."

She thanked me with evident relief, and as I put the telephone down I reflected that Darrel had got himself a very conscientious secretary.

I took to Miss Cherriton immediately I saw her. Tall, thin, with a pale face and heavy horn-rimmed spectacles, she looked trimmed to do battle with anybody. I guessed her to be about forty, and she exuded brisk efficiency as she sat behind her desk and told me more.

"I saw him yesterday. He looks a bit drawn, but it's not easy to judge how he is because he simply dismisses his injuries as a tiresome irrelevance. His bed was covered with papers, and we did quite a lot of work. I didn't know, but his room had been specially tidied in preparation for the visit of the eminent specialist. You know what a performance that is, with nurses scarcely daring to breathe in the presence. When Sister came in with the great man, followed by reverent students, and saw us, with papers and files strewn everywhere, her face was a study. I must say I derived a certain amount of amusement from it," said Miss

Cherriton discreetly.

"I can imagine. But really, if it's a question of possible internal injuries, he should stay where he is."

"You might try telling him that. Still, with any luck, I think he'll have the report on the X-rays today. The specialist summed up the nature of the patient pretty shrewdly, I fancy, and promised quick action. Excuse me."

She answered the telephone, gave some instructions, and returned to me.

"What is really worrying me is this housekeeper problem. I feel very much to blame, for I took the woman on. An appalling error of judgment on my part. I'm afraid I'm only accustomed to judging office staff, not domestic. She seemed a decent woman, and we only had the one applicant for the job. The house is dirty, half of Dr. Brynton's possessions are still not unpacked because the rooms haven't been cleaned, and although we've a canteen here for lunches, it closes after lunch. I don't see how he can manage in that house on his own, but what can we do?"

"He could go to a hotel until another housekeeper could be found."

"We're remote here. The nearest hotel is about five miles away and he won't be able to drive for some time. Our staff have managed to find billets in the village—those, that is, who live too far off to commute—and there's no spare accommodation. Fortunately, as we're only about twenty miles from the old Station, most of our key staff are able to commute by car."

The telephone interrupted us again. I glanced out of the window at the red-brick house some distance away from the main building. I had passed it on my way in and thought it looked quite attractive, as, although of recent construction, it had been built in the Tudor style of the old house, so that

Little Fenton and Fenton Grange lived within view of each other without discord. The scene otherwise was far from harmonious, for scaffolding was up round one wing of the Grange, builders were at work, cement mixers were active and a tractor was ploughing up part of the land while another band of men was working in the distance on erecting glasshouses. I could imagine Darrel's frustration at being out of action at such a time.

"I think I'd better come over every day and take on the housekeeping until you can find someone else," I said when Miss Cherriton was free again. "It's quite an easy journey for me by car. I could just see Dr. Brynton through the convalescent period."

"That would be an enormous relief. We simply cannot have him cracking up from neglect. I'll give you the key of the house and you can see for yourself what's involved. You know Dr. Brynton well?"

I explained the connection, and she remembered my father's name.

"Just before my time," she said. "I've been with Dr. Brynton for four years. But I remember hearing about Dr. Lansford. He was something of a legend here, I believe. Wasn't he the one who went on working in the research lab long after he was retired?"

"Yes. He took no notice of retirement. Just kept on as a working pensioner, so to speak. Nobody minded."

"I should think not. He'd done some fine work. So, in a way, you're part of our set-up. And you're as welcome now as manna from heaven, I can tell you. Now where did I put that key?" she said, searching a drawer of her desk. "Ah, here it is."

She handed me the key and glanced out of the window at the sound of a car outside. I followed her gaze. Darrel was

paying off a car-driver.

"Oh no!" said Miss Cherriton, dismayed.

A minute later he came in. I had not seen him since our Irish trip had ended and I was aware of a warm feeling of joy deep inside me, but he looked pale and drawn. One arm was in a sling and he moved stiffly.

"Hullo, Miss Cherriton. I hoped I'd get here before you packed up for the weekend. One or two points I wanted to be briefed on."

"Dr. Brynton, I'm sure you ought not to be out of hospital."

"Nonsense. I'm quite all right, except for the damnably tight strapping on my ribs."

"What about those X-rays?"

"I told them to phone me when they've got the pictures. I can go back if necessary, though I'm sure it won't be. Now, that specification of Grimshaw's. Have you a copy handy?" He turned to pull up a chair and then saw me, lurking in the shadow between two high filing cabinets. "Good lord! Jean. What are you doing here?"

"I only heard about the accident last night, Darrel. I was coming to see you in hospital this afternoon, but wanted to get fuller details from Miss Cherriton. I'm so sorry."

"Could have been worse," he said briefly, and I could not tell from his expression or his tone of voice whether he was pleased to see me or not.

"I'm just going over to your house to have a look round and see what I can do there. I won't hinder you from getting up to date. I'll see you later," I said firmly, sensing a protest in the offing, and went before he could say anything more.

The house had a damp, musty smell. There were two or three letters, unopened, on a table in the hall, among them

mine. So that explained Darrel's silence. I opened some windows for a start, then switched on every electric heater I could find, for it was as chilly as a morgue in there. Basically, it was a well-designed, pleasant house, but several rooms still lacked carpets, there were no curtains, and the furniture, good though sparse, was dusty. One room was full of packing-cases of books, opened but untouched. The kitchen confirmed Miss Cherriton's condemnation of the housekeeper, for the dirty floor, uninviting sink, revolting dishcloth and pile of dirty dishes on the draining board made it obvious that she had just walked out on being given notice without even bothering to empty the lipstick-stained cigarette ends from the ashtray on the windowsill. In the larder I found some stale cheese, a loaf green with mould, some sugar, an assortment of tins, a bottle of sour milk and little else. The refrigerator was empty and had been switched off. There was an unopened tin of coffee and a canister of tea in a cupboard.

From the kitchen window I could see Darrel walking slowly towards the site where the glasshouses were being erected. Two men were with him, neither of them Tom Fareham. On a Saturday morning the staff would undoubtedly be depleted. I guessed Darrel would be some time going round all the works in progress, and I set about making the kitchen more hygienic. I had got it more or less presentable and was making some coffee when Darrel came in.

"Can you bear tinned milk in coffee, or will you have it black?" I asked.

"Black, please."

"It's nearly lunch-time, but there's no food here, Darrel. Your canteen's not open on Saturdays, I believe, so what do you propose we do about lunch? I can nip down to the

village and get something to cook, or drive you to the nearest hotel."

He sat on the edge of the kitchen table and studied me.

"Would you, by any chance, be taking me in hand?"

"Precisely. You're obviously not fit to be up and about, let alone cope with domestic chores. You must just sink your pride and let me help you. There's nobody else on hand. Are you feeling very grisly?"

"I have felt better. This is your handwriting," he added, as he glanced through the letters in his hand.

"Yes. You'd better read it."

"These should have been brought to me. I suppose Miss Cherriton didn't know they were here."

I busied myself with the coffee while he read my letter.

"Thanks," he said, referring, I assumed, to my declaration of trust. "Of course I'll advise you when and if you wish. Sorry I didn't get it before. But you're not very consistent, Jean, are you?"

"I've had time to sort things out during the past months, and I've left the worst of my immature blunders behind me now, I hope."

"What were the points you wanted to discuss?"

"I'm not going to bother you with my little affairs just now. You've more than enough on your hands."

"Pleased with the car?"

"Very."

"You like the bookshop job?"

"Yes, but it's just come to an end. I only went there to fill a gap while some of the assistants were on holiday, although I could go back on a more permanent basis if I wished."

"And do you?"

"I haven't made up my mind. For the time being, I'm

stepping in here to housekeep for you until a housekeeper can be found."

"Are you?" he said reflectively, and I flushed.

"I hope you won't object."

"Thank you for the offer. But I can get food at the canteen, or go out for it, and I expect we shall get hold of a housekeeper soon."

"You don't want me, then?"

"I don't think it would be a suitable arrangement."

"How are you going to manage about food when the canteen isn't available? You can't drive with one arm immobilised."

"I made arrangements with that taxi-driver. He'll be my chauffeur for the next week or two, and there's a good hotel a few miles from here. I may move in there temporarily."

"I see." I might have known he was not the helpless type, nor the type to be a martyr. "That's all right, then, as long as you feel up to it. If there's any other way I can help, I hope you'll let me. Miss Cherriton seems hard pressed just now, and I can turn my hand to most things."

"That's kind of you, but we shall gradually get organised. I knew this change-over period would be a bit chaotic, but there's no reason to get in a flap. We're starting on a big job. Just now, we're really only clearing the way for the foundations. My enforced absence has thrown rather a lot on Miss Cherriton. She'll stop worrying now I'm back."

"I'm sure she will, if you don't neglect yourself and run the risk of being back in hospital."

"I'm not ill. A broken collar-bone and ribs are merely structural matters. They mend."

"The purely scientific outlook has its uses," I said drily, and saw the corners of his mouth crease.

"I agree. And you still appear to be weighed down by a

guilt complex, Jean."

"I was unjust to you. I can't ever forget that. But I was anxious about you, Darrel, and wanted to help. Why is it unsuitable for me to come here during the day and put this house in order?"

"I prefer employees to be employees, not friends."

"I worked for you in Ireland."

"That was a convenient arrangement between friends. Here, it's quite a different matter and you know it."

"Very well. If you don't want me here, that's all there is to it."

"It was kind of you to offer. If you'll excuse me, I'll open these now."

While he opened the other letters I went to the window and stared out, feeling empty and unhappy. He was refusing me the chance of proving what I had written in my letter. Was it because it didn't matter to him, anyway? Was work now more important? I didn't know. He baffled me. When he spoke, he sounded annoyed.

"Did you give Antonia my address?"

I was taken unawares, and had to think.

"Yes. I saw her about a fortnight ago. She hates her secretarial college and wanted to know whether I thought you might have an opening for her here. I didn't think so, but she asked me for this address and I gave it to her."

"I see. There's certainly no place here for a young girl with no training and no aptitude for work of any kind, it seems."

"That's a little hard. She's young and a bit groping just now. It's not easy at that age to find what work you want to do when you've no special vocation."

"Well, this isn't a nursery school," he said grimly, putting the letter in his pocket. "I arranged for the taxi-driver to

pick me up at one. Will you have lunch with me, Jean? We can discuss those business matters over lunch, perhaps."

There was a time, in my green days, when I would have been angry at his rejection and have refused the bone he now threw to me, but I had grown up at last.

"Thank you, Darrel. I'd like that."

He walked round and inspected my car while we waited for the taxi, and seemed to think I'd done well.

"If I'd known, I could have driven you to lunch instead of your having to hire the taxi. Or won't you even let me be your chauffeur?" I added gently.

He gave me a quick, sidelong glance.

"I dislike being driven anyway, and I'd better not prejudice good relations with the taxi-driver by cancelling it at this late stage. I shall need him quite a bit in the next week or two."

And so we went by taxi to a pretty little country inn where we had an excellent lunch. In spite of having only one effective arm, Darrel managed to do justice to the meal, with a little aid from me in cutting the meat from his lamb cutlets. But his face was thinner, and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes, and I couldn't help worrying a little at the thought of his return to that cheerless, empty house. But I knew now that I had to walk with care. Not for Darrel the quick return to the old footing just because I'd apologised. And I could understand that.

We discussed a few points about my finances, and then I led him on to talking about the work in progress at the Station. He moved awkwardly on his chair from time to time, and I guessed his ribs were bothering him.

"Not so much the ribs," he said in answer to my enquiry, "as the confounded sticking plaster. It's horribly tight and itches abominably."

In the taxi, he rested his head against the back of the seat as though exhausted, and I wanted to take him in my arms and to cradle him. And I knew full well how such maudlin actions would be received, so I looked out of the window at the rich autumn colours of the hedgerows and trees on that last day of October, when the sun shone and only the gentlest breeze stirred the leaves and brought them drifting down, gold, red, bronze.

"The country is lovely round here. You're lucky to be working in such a pleasant place," I said.

"Yes. What sort of a reception did Nick's book get, by the way? Tonie mentioned that you'd been in touch with him."

"He stood me a dinner on publication day. It's had a good reception so far. I deduced that he was very pleased, under that flippant, throw-away manner of his."

"Good. I must buy a copy. My reading time's a bit limited just now, though. And if the opportunity arises, discourage Tonie from entertaining any hopes about coming to the Station, will you? I shall write quite decisively, but she's not the type to give up easily once she's got an idea in her head, I fancy. I don't want her to waste her time thinking about it any more. Far better stick to her secretarial course."

I wondered just what she had written in that letter. There had been three pages of it, and the contents had obviously displeased him.

"I'll be suitably discouraging. I can't quite see her in an office job, though. I think some outdoor occupation might suit her better. She's such a lively girl."

When we arrived back at the Station, he paid off the taxi and walked across to my car with me.

"Can't I stay and get you some tea?" I asked lightly.

"Thanks, but no. I shall be working in the office this afternoon, and the caretaker will oblige with a pot of tea, no doubt."

"Independent to the last," I said, smiling, but feeling very far from a smiling mood. I wanted to ask him whether for him it was all over. Whether those wonderful moments we had shared in Ireland had been written off as holiday pleasures. But I was afraid.

"Well, we both appreciate independence. You've got yours now. It must be a great relief," he said.

"In a way. It's better that we should stand on an equal footing. But I need your friendship, Darrel. I hope you haven't withdrawn that along with the trusteeship. And please don't bring up the word inconsistent. We are all inconsistent in so far as we can make mistakes, misunderstand ourselves as well as others, and learn to change our minds."

"I'd be a fool to disagree. An even bigger fool to forget your very forceful remarks about my not being your keeper, remarks that were not spoken just on the spur of the moment in anger but which truly represented all you'd felt for years."

"I've just admitted that it's better for us to be on an equal footing. I really am adult now, Darrel. But must that cut out friendship?"

"I told you before. I'm not a man for half measures. But if you need my advice or help at any time, of course I shall be glad to give it. Now, if you'll excuse me. Remember me to Nick."

I stood staring after him. Not a man for half measures. But I didn't want half measures, either. Unhappy, baffled, I drove back to Ellarton not knowing what to think.

Chapter 14

GOSSIP

Antonia came to see me the following weekend. I took her for a drive round the Surrey hills and we came back to my room for tea. I deduced, from the way she kept bringing the conversation round to Darrel, that it was more for the sake of getting news of Darrel than for my own sake that she had sought me out. But I could sympathise with her. Once Darrel Brynton had got into your blood, it wasn't easy to get him out. I had told her that there was no possibility of her joining the staff there.

"They're all qualified people except for the few admin. people, and they, too, need to be experienced. There's no place for learners there at present, Tonie. Darrel made that quite clear when I went down there," I said, and had repeated this in various shades throughout the afternoon when she had repeatedly brought it up. Darrel was right. She did not easily give up.

As I plugged in my electric kettle, she sank down in my armchair and looked around her with evident approval.

"This is snug. I wish I had a place of my own. It's an hour's journey from home to the college, but my parents would think I'd gone mad if I suggested getting a bed-sitter or living in a residential hotel like this."

"What would you do for money?"

"That's it."

"You can hardly expect your parents to finance accommo-

dation for you in London when you've got a perfectly good home. Once you're earning your own living, it will be a different matter."

"Well, I'm quite sure I'll never earn it in an office. I think I shall give up after this term. I'd like an outdoor job. That's why I hoped that Darrel would give me a trial. He's been quite helpful. Gave me an address of a college where I could take a two-year diploma course in horticulture, and said that if I wanted a degree, it would mean a three-year course at a university. But as I'm no good at chemistry or maths or biology, I can't see myself tackling that. Surely there must be some routine job I could do there. I'm not ambitious. Don't mind about money, as long as I can keep myself from starving."

It was obvious that what she really wanted was to be near Darrel, and I wondered how I could make her understand that at this stage of her life it was worse than foolish to spend her time in some menial occupation just to moon around a man fifteen years older than herself who had no time for love's young dream. The time had come for some plain speaking, I felt, but I didn't want to hurt her.

"I think you must write off Darrel in your search for a job you'd like, Tonie. There really is no future in that direction. You're fond of animals. What about being a veterinary assistant? Or working at a riding school? You're a first-class rider."

She had flushed at my reference to Darrel, and now said with a nonchalant air,

"Oh, I suppose I'll sort it out. I shall have to stay where I am for the rest of this term, anyway."

Then she began to talk about her young brother, whose academic prowess so far eclipsed hers. And Darrel's name was not mentioned again.

"I'll walk to the station with you," I said, when she was ready to go.

We were just going downstairs when Mrs. Goring told me I was wanted on the telephone. I left Antonia in the hall while I went to the little cubbyhole just off the hall where the telephone was housed. It was Nick.

"I've managed to get seats for the whole cycle of—you guess what," he said.

"Not *The Ring*, Nick?"

"Yes. This is the third year of trying. I was beginning to think I'd have to go to Bayreuth."

"Bless you! But remember our bargain. Fifty-fifty."

"I never argue. Make a note of the dates."

"Half a minute. Right." I jotted down the times and dates of the performances as he said them. "That's splendid, Nick. Four whole blissful nights. What a gorgeous prospect!"

"It's a good cast. Better start building up your stamina. It's a concentrated dose of opera, all right."

"I will. Where shall I meet you on Tuesday?"

I was discussing that when Antonia put her head round the alcove and whispered,

"I'll be off, Jean, or I'll miss my train and I promised to be back in time to see some relatives. So long. And thanks."

I nodded and smiled goodbye as Nick offered me a choice of meeting places. We then had to settle where and when we would eat, where I could park my car, which would be needed owing to the fact that three of the four performances which made up the opera cycle finished very late whereas the last train to Ellarton left London just after eleven. By the time all of this was discussed and agreed it was too late to run after Antonia, who would just about have reached the station.

I was delighted about the opera. Although my mother had sung mainly in Italian operas, she had twice taken on

Wagnerian roles, once singing the part of a Valkyrie, and once a Rhine maiden in the epic of *The Ring,* and the records had fired me with the wish to see it, but Adrian had never been interested in opera, and to inflict four long evenings of undiluted Wagner on him would have been out of the question.

And so I had my feast of opera with Nick as my companion and it was all that I had anticipated, and helped to keep at bay the unhappiness which I felt at Darrel's aloofness. But it swamped me again one Saturday evening early in December when I was sorting out the photographs I had taken in Ireland. Perhaps it was because I was tired after the late nights at Covent Garden coupled with a busy time at the bookshop, to which I had returned, or perhaps it was because I had that morning received a very brief businesslike note from Darrel in response to an enquiry I had made about income tax, but a photograph of him taken on that wonderful day when we had watched the fulmars together suddenly had me in tears. He had been unaware of my camera as he helped to launch the dinghy, and I had him in profile, looking a bit hawk-like, the lean, whippy strength of the man apparent as he leaned to his task. The arm exerting itself there had that morning held me fast on the rocky airy perch as we looked down on the shark and the diving terns and gannets, and the hand on the gunwale of the boat had been on my heart. And surely the quality of that day was based on something indestructible, on something more than a holiday diversion.

There was a knock on the door and I hastily wiped my eyes as Mrs. Goring looked in to tell me that I was wanted on the telephone. It was Nick.

"Jean, I'm just about to leave my grandparents' house. One of those monthly family tea-parties. I thought of stopping off at the coffee shop in Ellarton on my way home if you're free

to meet me there for a little natter. I need restoring after the impact of all the relatives, and there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Yes, I'm free," I said, sniffing a little. "When?"

"Say in twenty minutes?"

"I'll be there."

"You all right? You sound a bit husky."

"Just a frog in my throat. Be seeing you."

I collected the photographs together, glad of the interruption, for my own thoughts were poor company and Nick's lighthearted presence would help me to forget for a brief interval. I did the best I could to disguise my red eyes, and by the time I had walked briskly along the quiet road out to the High Street, the cold night air had restored me.

Nick was already installed in one of the wooden settles in the coffee shop.

"You look as though you've withstood the family gathering very well," I said as I settled myself opposite him. "Must be the effect of a good conscience at having done your duty."

"Could be. It's quite amusing, meeting them all now and again, and Grandma always has a bracing effect. Quite apart from the fact," he added darkly, "that it's as well to keep up to date with the latest gossip. This time, it's Tonie stirring the pot. About you and me."

"What's the girl got in her head now?"

"That we're engaged, and are on the brink of a secret marriage. Spilt all this out over the cucumber sandwiches and Victoria sponge to the great relish of the whole clan. The way they love to poke their noses into other people's affairs is amazing. I could have crowned the girl with the raspberry jam."

"What made her think of it?" I asked, amazed.

"The silly little noodle heard you talking about *The Ring*

on the phone to me, and, ignorant child that she is where music's concerned, concluded that it was either an engagement or a wedding ring. And since you and I are obviously good friends, she couldn't see that it was such an outlandish guess. I scotched it quite firmly, but I expect one or two are saying there's no smoke without fire. To see me caught in the matrimonial web would give them the greatest joy, in view of my pronouncements on the subject over the past years."

"Well, I daresay there's no harm done," I said as the coffee arrived.

"I don't give a fig myself, but when I tackled her again after tea, she admitted that she'd told Darrel."

Nick was eyeing me thoughtfully, and I could not hide my dismay.

"When did she tell him?"

"I gather that some time back she was hinting at it. Asking him to let her know if he got an inkling of it, because she wasn't going to let us get away with a secret wedding. Long before she heard the talk about *The Ring*, apparently. Said she had a hunch about us."

I remembered the long letter from her which Darrel had read in my presence. And his displeasure. Did that explain his aloofness? But surely he would have asked me to confirm it? And then I remembered what I had said to him about interfering in my affairs on that ghastly occasion in the Connemara hotel.

"I see," I said, stirring my coffee.

"I think you can be sure that it wasn't from self-interest that she spilled the beans to Darrel, though if we didn't know her better we might have thought it was. Just a case of too much romantic nonsense in her head and a capacity for rushing in where angels fear to tread."

"Of course. I'll explain to Darrel. She's been in touch

with him about a job."

"So I gathered. Jean, you don't have to tell me, but is it Darrel?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. What's the matter with him? He struck me as an intelligent type. And the expression in his eyes once or twice didn't spell out indifference, although he's good at the poker face."

"It's a long and complicated story, Nick. I'm the one who made a mess of it. Blundered. It goes back to my teens, really. My long campaign with Darrel. But what you've told me about Tonie has given me a faint hope that things will come right."

"Perhaps I should have kept quiet. Why should I saw off the comfortable branch on which I'm sitting?" said Nick with a wry expression.

"You and I, Nick. It was the right thing for us, wasn't it? Now that your book's a success and you're in the literary swim, and London's claimed you again after that insidious Irish air, you must feel that, too."

"And what am I supposed to say to that?" he asked, an odd little smile on his lips.

"The truth. I'd hate to feel there was any hurt, though. There's too much that's hurtful in this life, as it is."

"Then, no hurt. Yes, I am best suited by a bachelor life. I'm not cut out for domesticity. That doesn't mean I shan't envy the man who marries you. I'd prefer you to remain single so that we can enjoy a bee-autiful friendship."

"We do, and shall," I said, smiling at his saccharine tone.

"No. If not Darrel, then some other man. You've got loving written all over you."

"We made a bargain about our friendship, remember?"

"Darrel Brynton strikes me as being the sort to take over

everything, lock, stock and barrel."

"Possessive? Not unreasonably so. He has a good mind."

"And a powerful hold. Never mind. I shall manage a few fringe benefits, perhaps."

"Don't worry. There are few signs that I shall be taken over."

"Then Darrel's a bigger fool than I take him for. I have to confess that I like him. And in many ways, I think he'd be good for you. Altruism can go no further. Which brings me to my other piece of information. Amidst all the banal chatter at the tea-table, I did manage to have a few sane words with another cousin of mine, Alison. She runs a library in Dilford. Know it?"

"Yes. A few miles from Deanswood, where the new Horticultural Station is. I've only been through it a few times. A nice little town."

"Well, Alison wants to take a partner. She's been married two or three years, and doesn't want to be quite so tied to the business. Wants more time for home and husband, but she's keen on the business, too, and has built it up into quite a nice little enterprise. She's got a chance to expand it, and asked me if I knew anybody who would like to invest a little capital and come in as a partner. Part-time would do. She'd like somebody around her own age or younger, and it doesn't much matter about the capital. Her husband will find it for her if need be. But she thought someone might like to put a stake in it. I thought of you, and said I'd mention it to you."

"Sounds an attractive proposition. How old is your cousin?"

"Let me see. Twenty-seven, I believe. I think you'd like her. Married a landscape architect who has offices in Dilford. Anyway, I'll give you her name and address, and you can write to her if you're interested."

He scribbled the name and address on a slip of paper while I poured him another cup of black coffee, feeling glad about this new possibility, for I had only arranged to go back to the bookshop until Christmas, without having any clear idea of where to go from there, for Darrel was filling my thoughts to such an extent that everything else tended to get pushed aside. I slipped the piece of paper into my handbag and listened to Nick's witty description of a literary cocktail party he had attended the previous night, so that I felt in an altogether more robust mood when I finally walked back to the hotel under a sky glittering with stars.

I telephoned Darrel immediately I got back. I wanted to put myself out of this misery of uncertainty as soon as I could.

"I'd like to come and see you to discuss one or two things, Darrel," I said. "When will it be convenient?"

"Business?"

"Among other things."

"Is it urgent?"

"Yes," I said firmly.

"Then we'd better make it tomorrow, if that's all right for you. Say two-thirty?"

I agreed and he rang off. So that was that. I was determined to have all cards down on the table with him. I still didn't know how much Antonia's story had weighed with him, or whether that bridge I had damaged was just not repairable anyway. But I meant to find out. And I wasn't going to spare myself in doing so. There was no place for pride. I could only offer all I had to offer, and leave him to accept or reject it. I owed him that, at the very least.

Chapter 15

CAPITULATION

It had been a mild morning with a little drizzle, but when I drove to Deanswood in the afternoon the cloud had broken up and now drifted across a blue sky in woolly blobs like sheep. The last of the autumn leaves had fallen and it was old December's bareness everywhere but the wild clematis tumbled over the hedgerows like silver spray, and the hawthorn was loaded still with its plum-coloured berries. I avoided the main roads and drove through the narrow twisting Surrey lanes which I knew so well. Hollies were carrying a profusion of berries and so were the yew trees. I liked the country in winter, with the delicate tracery of bare trees, the bright green of winter wheat in the fields, the russet leaves of autumn making a fiery carpet in the beech woods.

I half longed, half dreaded to see Darrel, fearing that look of aloofness that put such an insuperable barrier between us, fearing that this was the day when I must accept another defeat, and the worst yet. And as I left Surrey behind and the lovely smooth lines of the South Downs lay in front of me, my fears increased.

I drove past the wide gates of the Fenton Grange Horticultural Station to the smaller separate entrance to Little Fenton. It was a narrow twisting drive through tall shrubs to the clearing where I parked my car. When I got out, my legs felt like jelly and there was a sinking feeling in

the pit of my stomach. I breathed in deeply the soft south-west air which spoke of the sea. Then Darrel was at the door, welcoming me in with a formal politeness which was no help.

The house looked in better order now, and there was a cheerful fire in the sitting-room. He looked rather drawn still, I thought, but his arm was now in good working order and I knew that the X-ray pictures had revealed no internal injuries. He was quite fit again, he assured me in answer to my enquiries, and pulled up an armchair for me. I looked at my hands and sought the words that might turn him from a stranger into the man I loved.

"Well, what's the problem? Income tax, bonus issues?" he asked.

"It wasn't business I came to discuss. At least, not primarily."

He looked surprised, eyeing me through narrowed eyes as he leaned back in his chair. Some rolls of paper were lying across the sofa. They looked like plans. He had doubtless been studying them while waiting for me.

"Don't tell me you want any help from me in your personal affairs, Jean," he said calmly.

I found his gaze unnerving, and got up suddenly and went to the window, staring out of it with unseeing eyes. Then I swung round and said,

"I believe Tonie told you that Nick and I were engaged, and contemplating a secret marriage. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"And you believed her?"

"I had no reason to do otherwise. It seemed probable enough."

His cool, ironic tone angered me, which was just as well, as anger loosened my tongue and drove away my inhibitions.

"Probable, that I should flit from Adrian to you to Nick in less than a year? How shallow do you think I am?"

"On the rebound from Adrian."

"I don't rebound like that," I flashed.

"You and Nick have a lot in common. He could seem a safe bet. Tonie said she had good reasons for thinking so."

"She's a child, and misunderstood it like a child. Nick and I are friends. No more. She heard me mention Wagner's *Ring* when I was talking to Nick on the telephone. He'd managed to get seats for the whole cycle. I'd asked him to try to get them for me, too, and I paid for mine. Tonie decided that it was either an engagement ring or a wedding ring."

"I see. She'll be disappointed."

"Nick disillusioned her yesterday. She was bent on disclosing it at a family gathering. He stopped off on his way home to warn me. That was the first I knew of it."

"And you were anxious to disillusion me, too?"

"Yes. I thought it just possible that your aloofness, your determination to treat me as a stranger, might have something to do with Tonie's gossip. Has it?"

"Something, yes. But isn't that how you want it, anyway? I seem to remember some pretty explicit words to that effect."

"No, it's not how I want it," I snapped. "Why do you think I came to see you before and offered my help?"

"That's a very easy one to answer. Because, my girl, you have a conscience about what happened. I keep on telling you that you don't have to feel guilty about it. Anyone is entitled to their opinion about another person, and you apologised for the error. That closed it."

"Oh no it didn't. And you know it didn't. Stop fencing with me and come out into the open." I was blazing now,

and the words couldn't come fast enough. "If your pride is so enormous that you can't forget an injustice which I deeply regretted and said so, all right. You just stew in it. If when you made love to me in Ireland, it was just a holiday diversion and you want to forget it, just say so, and I'll know. Just don't sit there like some stone image, all detached and cynical. Because I have feelings. Real flesh and blood feelings."

"Tell me what they are, then. I thought I knew. But perhaps I'm wrong. You're a bit in . . ."

"If you say inconsistent again, I'll scream. We're all inconsistent sometimes, we all have moods, we're not just cold lumps of logic."

"Tell me about those feelings, Jean," he said, and although he hadn't moved, I thought I could detect signs of humanity in his face again. And then I knew that he was going to make me go all the way before he committed himself. And perhaps that was only justice. And whatever his commitment, I wanted him to know mine, anyway, so that it wasn't as difficult as I had thought to throw away all my defences and leave myself at his mercy.

"I love you, Darrel. When you said in Ireland that I was past the point of no return, you spoke the truth. You asked me to give it time to let it grow. Well, it didn't have much time before I took a hatchet to it. But I was jealous of Deirdre when I read the end of that letter, I've never had much confidence in myself and it was easy to think in the heat of the moment that I'd just been a diversion. I don't know whether for you that hatchet was enough to kill it. For me, it was no more than a childish gesture of anger. The last of my childhood, perhaps. I asked you to forgive me. I don't think you have. But I *was* past the point of no return. I've never been in doubt about that since that ghastly night."

He was standing up now, his back to me, staring into the fire.

"But after all the years we'd known each other," he said. "That's what flummoxed me. Not that you should think I'd been having an affair with Deirdre or any other woman. I'm no monk. But that you should think I'd hide behind Adrian's cloak to save my face! That really stuck in me."

"But I was in a highly emotional state. I don't want to make excuses, but remember, Darrel, the events that led up to that night. I'd been in a terrifying nightmare at sea, then I lost the man who had meant so much to me, and was tormented by the half-knowledge that he had loved someone else, been disloyal to me. I couldn't believe it, but it was there, all the time we were in Ireland, boring into me. I had to know the truth. Then I fell in love with you, and Deirdre came up again and it seemed like the old betrayal and rejection. And it all happened within the space of six months. I was awash in a sea of emotions. If I thrashed around and didn't seem to know what was true and what false, was it so surprising?"

"I've used those arguments to myself time and again, and I see the force of them. But always, Jean, you've had this little core of resistance to me; of dislike. I thought it had died, that we had the makings of a good team, and then that night it was all there again, flaring up unmistakably, as though you were almost glad of the opportunity to restore Adrian's halo and put the villain's cap on me. Oh, I know I could have taken you in my arms afterwards, as I could now, and we would want each other and forget everything else, but it would be there all the same and it's not the answer, is it? There's a whole lot to life besides making love."

"Is that what you meant when you said you were not a

man for half measures?"

"Not where you're concerned, anyway. I never regarded you as a potential mistress, employee or housekeeper," he said drily. "That was a very ingenuous offer, if you like. I wanted you for my wife. But when I saw that night how the old hostility still lived on, I knew there was no future in it for either of us. We should be bound to come to grief. When Tonie told me about you and Nick, I thought it was perhaps all for the best, but I didn't want to be tormented by the sight of you again. I wanted to forget you, if I could."

"So you wish it had been true, then? About Nick and me."

"What sort of a fish do you think I am? Of course I'm glad it's not true. I can be as illogical as you. Minds and bodies seldom speak the same language."

"Don't you think that for once you might trust your instincts more and that probing brain of yours less? You read too much into that outburst of mine that night. Hang it all, knowing nothing of your altruistic motives, how do you suppose I felt at being followed, manhandled, locked in my room with my clothes taken away like a naughty child?"

"You asked for it."

"But I didn't *know*," I said despairingly. "I could only see it as an act of brutal obstruction. If only you'd told me about Deirdre before!"

"If I'd known you had an inkling, I would. But I thought you were without any suspicion. How would you have met my frankness about Adrian's double life in those circumstances? I can just imagine it," he said bitterly.

"But need you have gone to such lengths to keep it from me?"

"I thought it would crack you up if you knew. You set such store by Adrian. You'd had so little affection in your

life. I was determined that you shouldn't suffer that damage. In fact, you stood up to it very well. I didn't dream you knew, or half knew."

"You've always cared, Darrel, haven't you? About me."

"Yes. You were so vulnerable. I wasn't in love with you until we came to Ireland, and you seemed suddenly to have matured then, and I saw you differently. Before, you'd seemed a child to me. But a child I was always concerned about."

"You were against my engagement to Adrian, weren't you?"

"Knowing what I did about Deirdre, yes."

"You were right. I didn't realise then what was missing. It seems funny, in this day and age, doesn't it, that I should have been so innocent? I was deeply fond of him, we were always good friends, I would have done all I could to make him happy, but as far as sex was concerned, we might have been brother and sister. With Adrian, it had been channelled elsewhere. With me, it was just unawakened, I suppose. I don't know how our marriage would have worked out. There would have been kindness, affection. A pleasant enough life, I expect, but we might both of us have come to feel hungry for more. I can't tell. What I do know, though, is that what is between us is of a quite different dimension. I want you to know that, Darrel, because I think you're reading too much into my outburst about you and Adrian that night."

"It was explicit enough," said Darrel.

"I know. I was so angry and tired and unhappy. All I can say now is that I love you. In every way. Perhaps that's why I behaved so badly when I thought you'd deceived me. I was fond of Adrian. There's a world of difference. That's why you and I can hurt each other so much more than Adrian and I could. That's why I stood up to Adrian's loss

and the deception over Deirdre better than you thought I would. Because I was beginning to learn what it was to love a man, and that man was you. When I thought that you'd been playing with me, that I was one in a procession after Laura Fairmont and Deirdre, disintegration felt very near. When you told me the truth about Adrian and Deirdre, I felt sad on their behalf more than mine. What I felt desperately unhappy about was the damage I'd done to you and me the previous night. That was when I really grew up."

"Why didn't you say all this before?" he said quietly. "Oh, you apologised. But only as anyone would after making a mistake."

"Because I felt emotionally played out. Because you were so unapproachable. Because even then I couldn't quite believe that you loved me, that I wasn't just a sort of responsibility, that I mightn't be embarrassing you by assuming more than I should from a holiday affair. Because I feared another rejection. Because of pride. Because I have a wonderful knack of failing with personal relationships. A bit of all those things, I suppose."

"And then you turn up, bright and helpful, as though nothing had happened, to ask after my health and offer your services as a home help! If that wasn't pure farce, I don't know what was."

"I was afraid. You were so unapproachable."

"Rubbish. After all the years you've known me. You only had to come up to me and say what you said just now. What was I supposed to think, for heaven's sake? I'd been told that you and Nick were as good as engaged, you'd given me the necessary apology and then turned up as a bright and helpful friend because I happened to have broken a collar-bone. I wasn't unapproachable. Only in a damned

bad temper. Which would have improved a lot if you'd stopped being a coward and come out with the truth instead of looking all hang-dog and guilty and bleating 'I'm sorry'."

"Yes, Darrel," I said meekly. "Do we have to have all this width of carpet between us?"

"I'm not stopping you from coming," he said, holding out his hand.

Then I was in his arms, saying in a wobbly voice,

"So much at stake. That made me afraid."

"The trouble with you always has been that your childhood left you with an indelible conviction of being a nuisance, unwanted. You couldn't credit that I really wanted you and so you've hesitated all this time to tell me the truth. How am I going to put any confidence into you, dear? Confidence in your own worth."

I couldn't speak. Relief had swept all my stiffening away and I was crying. He moved his fingers in my hair and held me quietly for a few moments, then lifted my wet face and studied it.

"That was the truth, just now?" he asked.

"Yes. Searched out from my heart. The whole truth."

"Then nothing else matters," he said, kissing me gently.

He ran a finger through the tears on my cheeks, then handed me a handkerchief from his breast pocket, saying with an odd little smile,

"I suppose this might be called a happy reunion."

"A wonderfully happy reunion," I said, sniffing and wiping my eyes.

He picked up the ribbon which tied my hair back and handed it to me.

"You look like Undine with your hair round your shoulders, a watery sprite. While you put yourself together, I'll get a pot of tea to fortify you. The prospect of marrying me

is altogether too much for you, I can see. That won't deter me, though."

When I had restored myself, I sat down in the armchair, conscious that my legs were still shaky, and registered the fact that the room was looking clean and pleasant, and when Darrel returned with a tray of tea and some toast, I asked him who was looking after the place.

"The wife of the Station caretaker comes in for a couple of hours' cleaning each morning. Mrs. Ilchester. She's a good soul. She cooks a meal when I want it, too, but I've been eating mostly at the canteen or that pub I took you to."

"Darrel," I said, pouring out the tea, "that letter from Tonie that you read while I was here. She mentioned Nick and me then?"

"Yes. She had a hunch she said, and wouldn't it be a splendid outcome of that marvellous summer in Ireland? She wasn't sure, but would I let her know the minute I had confirmation. That was a nice sour apple to bite on."

"Well why on earth didn't you say something about it? I was there."

"Your personal affairs were no business of mine, you'd told me. If it was true, I should know soon enough."

"If you hadn't received that letter, would you have been less off-putting? Would you have let me help you, as I wanted to?"

"Help me? No. How do you think I could have concentrated on work with you here? I told you. I wanted to try to forget you since I was convinced that you couldn't ever love me. I didn't want a tepid friendship."

"So that if Tonie hadn't blabbed at that tea-party and Nick hadn't told me, and I hadn't come today, we might have been lost to each other always."

"It depends on whether you would have come anyway, some time, and told me the truth. It wasn't pride on my part, Jean. I really believed that there was too much in me which you disliked, had always disliked, to make a future together anything but a series of misunderstandings and rows between the love-making. All right for an affair, perhaps, but disastrous for a marriage, and that's what I wanted. Believing that, I shouldn't have made any approach. It had to come from you."

"So, in a way, we owe it to Tonie that we've come together again. I don't know whether I'd have had the courage to come if I hadn't had the hope that here was the possible explanation for that continued coolness of yours. I think the worst thing that Adrian did to me was to make me lose faith in my judgement. If I'd been so blind as never to suspect that he loved someone else all the time he was engaged to me, how could I trust my judgment about your feelings? It's frightening, to think we might have lost each other because of a failure to understand."

"Well, it may be because I'm in an optimistic mood under the influence of buttered toast, a cosy fireside and you behind that tea-pot, but I think, some time, you'd have slipped under my guard and I'd have learned the truth from you, Tonie or not. So don't look so scared."

But I was scared, to think how nearly we had been lost to each other. Life had not made me so confident as he that it would all have worked out in the end. It had all been so chancy right from the start. If I hadn't been so ill on that boat, Adrian would have told me, and if I hadn't concealed Deirdre's name from Darrel, he would have told me. And so on. Looking back, I could see that such important consequences had come from such trivial causes that life appeared to be a joker, sporting with us quite wantonly.

"I wonder that you're so confident about me, Darrel. I've made a hash of things between us so far."

"We had our moments," he said, half smiling. "And you know how incensed I get when you start parading your inferiority complex. And I don't flatter myself that I'm God's gift to a woman. You might have done better with Nick, you know."

"I don't love Nick. There was never any question of that in my mind. And Nick likes his freedom. I'm fond of him. We're good friends, and always shall be, I hope."

Darrel's dark eyes met mine for a moment, then he nodded and said,

"Yes. He's a nice chap. Our ride together might not be so smooth, though."

"Because we care more."

Again he nodded. He had asked me a question about Nick, without spelling it out, and had accepted my reply. I knew he would never ask it again. He had never doubted my word. I wished, piercingly, that I could have said the same. However much he disliked my guilt complex, I should always feel ashamed that I had failed to give him the same trust when it came to the crunch.

"Smooth or rough, what does it matter?" I went on. "It will be wonderful to belong, with love."

"And no better words than those have ever fallen on my ears," he said, smiling. "I want the belonging to start soon. How long will you need? One week? Two?"

"Two, at most."

"That's what I like. A girl who knows her own mind. The best I can do in the way of a honeymoon is to tack a few days on to Christmas. We'll have a full-scale one next summer. Any ideas?"

"In the summer, I'd like to go back to Ireland.

Killarney."

"So would I. Didn't think that perhaps you would."

I realised then that it would take a long time to reassure him completely. But I should do it.

"I fell in love with that country for its own sake, and because it's where I came to love you. That far outweighs any unhappy associations. I'll never forget the day we watched the fulmars. And Killarney, where it started. I shall always love that country, as I shall always love you. So what better choice?"

There was a queer, moved expression on his face that I had never seen before, and it was a moment or two before he said with a smile,

"And you choose to say that when my hand's occupied with buttered toast! Killarney it shall be."

"The choice for Christmas I leave to you."

"Madeira is lovely at this time of year. What about your commitments at the bookshop?"

"I'm only on a temporary basis. A week's notice will be all right. There's no shortage of student helpers as Christmas gets near."

"Will you mind living here? It has its disadvantages, living on the job, but at this stage of the project it's necessary. I shan't bring the job home, if you're thinking what home life was like with your father. The two spheres will be kept apart, I promise you."

"You don't have to reassure me. I like this house. I should like any house we lived in together but this really is a very pleasant one."

"This complete capitulation is too much. Do you realise, girl, that you're reducing me to the state of a marshmallow when I'm trying to be practical? And that reminds me. Was there any business you wanted to discuss, or was that a

face-saver?"

"Sort of. I was afraid you might refuse to see me for anything else but business. But I did have a small excuse," I said, and told him about Nick's cousin and the library in Dilford. "I wanted to discuss it with you before I got in touch with her. About what sort of a stake I should offer. Now, of course, the outlook has changed."

"You'd still like to do it?"

"I think it would be a good idea," I said slowly. "I shouldn't consider more than half-time work there, but I could easily manage that and run this house with the aid of your caretaker's wife, if you had no objection."

"Why should I? Am I so possessive?"

"No. But you could so easily swallow me up because that's the effect you have on me, and I think that would be unwise for both of us. I don't think you'd want an abject, adoring domestic slave with a mind like a cabbage, and it would be better for me, too, perhaps to have something else in my mind during the day besides you."

"Agreed. You've a good mind. It should be used in the sphere it's been trained for."

"There are times when I appreciate the advantages of the scientific mind," I said, smiling. "But you and our home and our children, if and when we have them, will always come first. I know too much about homes where careers come first. Ours won't be like that."

"You'll be good at it. You're warm and loving and generous, and you haven't an outsize ego. But I think the library idea is a good one. Dilford's handy. Barely twenty minutes by car. You probably won't get much return on your capital, but you'll be involved with the world of books, which you like, and performing a useful service. You'll get more satisfaction out of that than watching the prices of

your shares on the stock market. I should go ahead."

"So many doors opening. All this, and heaven too! I begin to think I'm dreaming."

"I feel a bit dizzy myself. It takes a little time to get acclimatised to happiness. This morning, after all, it was still grey winter."

We sat on in the firelight, talking and making plans, and then we rustled up a meal. I cooked an omelette, and we followed with cheese and fruit, and Darrel produced a bottle of wine. Then, over a jug of coffee, we listened to a performance of Schubert's C Major symphony. Music had always had the power to melt my bones, and it was inevitable that this led me afterwards into Darrel's arms for a spell of another kind of ecstasy, after which he insisted on making me another jug of coffee in order to sober me up for the drive home.

"Now keep your mind on the job," he abjured me as we walked to the car together. "I'd much rather have driven you back myself. You may be O.K. as far as the breathaliser's concerned, but you've got other potent intoxicants in your blood tonight, my girl. At least, they've intoxicated me, and you've got a dreamy look about you that doesn't suggest concentration on the road."

"You wouldn't be doubting my ability as a driver, would you?"

"No. Only this state of euphoria. You're very precious. I can worry like anyone else."

"No need," I said, kissing him.

"Telephone me when you get back. I shall be waiting."

"Darling! You're revealing all sorts of weaknesses in your armour which I never suspected before."

"Ah, love's an insidious thing."

That was another mistake I'd made, I thought. To think

him invulnerable. Ever since I was a girl, he had seemed to me impregnable; assured, authoritative, in complete control, self sufficient. I hadn't credited him with sensibilities that could be hurt, with feelings that ran deep and were just as susceptible to damage as those of frailer vessels. I put my arms round his neck and kissed him again.

"Goodnight, my love. I'll try to make amends for all my foolishness. And I'll telephone you tonight, but don't worry. I've every reason in the world now for taking the utmost care."

Chapter 16

HOUSE-WARMING

I was playing the piano while I waited for our guests. We were giving a small dinner party that Saturday by way of a belated house-warming. The scent of wallflowers came through the open window and in the mirror opposite me I could see the reflection of the pale gold fronds of the willow tree moving gently in the breeze over the fresh green grass of May. It seemed in tune with Debussy and 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair'. The piano had been Darrel's wedding present to me and was a constant joy. He had come in late, and was still in the bathroom. I was enjoying this interlude after a busy few hours cooking and preparing for the evening. Now, with everything ready and Mrs. Ilchester kindly taking over from me, I was looking forward to welcoming friends whom I was guiltily aware of having neglected since our wedding in December.

Darrel came in, knotting his tie, and slid his hands over my shoulders.

"Just made it. You look nice. I like that dress. It manages to look seductive and innocent at the same time. The colour of a Gloire de Dijon rose. All very calm and serene, so I don't need to ask if everything's under control."

"It is," I said, smiling up at his dark face and putting my hands over his.

"You can always tell a first-class organiser by the absence of rush and bustle. And that sounds like Nick's touch," he

added, as the sudden roar of a car engine died on the air.

The evening went easily and enjoyably from the start, for the ten of us had a lot of interests in common and there was no formality. I had played for safety with prawn cocktails and roast lamb for dinner, but had gone to town on some exotic sweets as well as a good assortment of cheeses. With Darrel something of a connoisseur of wine, we were all in a happy, relaxed mood over dinner and I looked round the table with a warm feeling of pleasure at having our friends with us here in our home. Nick, wearing a dazzling tie which suggested emerald green forked lightning against a pink sky, was arguing with Alison Helmsdale about a certain author while Darrel at the other end of the table was involved in a discussion of some aspects of conservation. Next to him was Tom Fareham's wife, Freda, a buxom, lively young woman, who had once worked at the Horticultural Station, where she had met Tom. Beside her was Silas Helmsdale, Alison's husband. The Helmsdales had become good friends since I had joined Alison in partnership. Silas being a landscape architect, he and Darrel had working interests in common besides having taken a liking to each other. Tom Fareham was talking to Antonia, who had seemed a little subdued when she greeted me, perhaps in reproach for past neglect. Our party was completed by an old friend of my mother's who had always kept in touch with me and who, at seventy, was still conducting operas, and the new wife who had been his secretary and chauffeur for years past and whom he had quietly married a few days after giving me away at my wedding. And so, altogether, the sciences and arts were about equally represented at our dinner table, and as most of us had ready tongues, the volume of sound was considerable.

Later, feeling that tongues had wagged long enough and conscious that Tonie looked a little lost, I put on some records and we used the hall for dancing, for it was a good size and its polished parquet flooring was the only uncarpeted floor we had. Nick, dancing the first dance with me, eyed me reprovingly.

"Well, Jean. Do you know this is the first time we've been together since your wedding day?"

"I do know and I feel very guilty, but somehow we've been so busy, what with getting the house as we wanted it, and my starting up in partnership with Alison."

"Mere excuses to save you from confessing that you're so besotted with that man you've married that you've no mind for anything or anyone else."

"Could be, but please, it's only five months, remember."

"All right. You're forgiven. It's worked out well for you, hasn't it?"

"Wonderfully. I don't feel the same person at all."

"There's certainly a glow about you. A new confidence. And you've transformed Darrel. He's dropped years. You're undermining all my theories, you know. But it's early days yet. I don't have to say that I'm glad, though, do I?"

"No, dear Nick, you don't. And you are dazzling literary London with your talent, I guess."

"Wasting too much time at parties. I'm thinking of going into a retreat to get some work done. There's something I want to ask you, Jean. About Tonie. She's havering about accepting a chance to go to Canada with a friend she made at some riding school. This girl has been over here for a year. Her parents have a ranch in British Columbia. Breed horses and train them. They've invited Tonie there for a year. To help with the horses and so on. A sort of return. Tonie's parents have been good to the girl. If you get a chance, will

you and Darrel urge her to go? I think she should. Best thing for her."

"And her parents?"

"They think it best, too, though they don't want to lose her. But they're worried about her. She's lost her old vitality. They don't know why, but I think her mother's got an idea that she left her heart with someone in Ireland."

"Oh. I'd hoped . . ."

"Yes. We thought it was just hero-worship. Puppy love. Call it what you will. But it's more like an obsession, I'm afraid. We underrated it."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, it was all a bit of a pantomime, really. Just before Easter I called on my grandparents. In lieu of joining a large family party there at Easter. I had other plans. To spend Easter in Paris, as a matter of fact. Disapproval from Grandma since a bevy of relatives were coming down from Northumberland, including my elder sister and her husband. My visit was placatory, you might say. Whenever you go and see Grandma, though, you can be pretty sure she'll have a little job waiting for you. Mine was to take a bundle of clothes to Aunt Lucy on my way home for one of her numerous charity sales. Well, I found Aunt Lucy in the throes of dismantling the house to accommodate the overflow of Northumbrians, since Grandma hasn't room for the lot. She was moving another bed into Tonie's room to make it a double, and making up a camp bed for Tonie in the attic. Why Tonie hesitates about going to Canada, I can't imagine."

"I don't think a camp bed is all that terrible, and she probably likes the Northumbrians, anyway," I said, smiling, as I watched Darrel talking to Silas. What was he saying to warrant two clenched fists to emphasise it?

"Well, gallant as ever, I helped Aunt Lucy with the removals. The rest of the family had prudently vanished. To accommodate the second bed, we had to move Tonie's bed, and to move Tonie's bed so that the prospective occupant could get into it we had to move the wardrobe. During the absence of Aunt Lucy, I was able to give vent to my feelings when I ripped the sleeve of my shirt trying to get the said wardrobe over a protruding edge of carpet. This, I thought, is what comes of doing my duty and coming to see the old lady. I gave the wardrobe a somewhat vicious heave and nearly had the confounded thing out of the window. An attaché case shot off the top, nearly brained me, bounced off the edge of the dressing-table and burst open, spewing out an assortment of papers. I collected them together. An enlarged photograph of one of the snapshots of Darrel which Tonie took in Ireland; an article he'd written in some journal; several snaps in which he appeared with one or other of us; that plan he drew for her of the easiest route up the Sugarloaf Mountain; a sea-shell which I can only suppose was hallowed because Darrel had touched it; a handkerchief with D. in the corner; and a letter from him. One he'd written saying he couldn't offer any openings at the Station and giving her some advice about qualifications if she wanted to go in for that sort of work. I didn't pry. I knew what was in it because she'd shown it to me when she asked me to have a go at him and see if I could make him see how useful she could be at the Station. I really believe she'd have spent her time collecting worms if she could have got here and had him in her sights again."

"Oh Nick! How pathetic!"

"I know. All that was missing was a lock of his hair. I bundled them all back and stuck the case on top of the wardrobe again. And then Aunt Lucy asked me if I knew

what was wrong with Tonie. She hadn't been herself since that stay in Ireland. I said it was growing pains and not to worry. That's why I'm in favour of Canada and would welcome any support from you and Darrel. You two might carry weight."

"I'll have a word with him. I'm sorry. She's so young and things can hurt piercingly then, however foolish they seem to outsiders. And he's just the type, of course, to appeal to a young girl in search of a hero."

"M'm. Impressive looks, masterful, charming when he likes, and a hint of danger to add the spice. And to cap it all, he saved her from drowning. Tailor-made for the role."

"And he'd hate it. There's no vanity in him. It's the last thing he'd want—to hurt Tonie, have her waste her energies on him."

"You don't have to tell me. I know him. And that letter was a masterly putting off without unkindness. My cousin happens to be particularly tenacious, though. No fault of Darrel's. Of course it's utterly absurd. I could tell her that he's old enough to be her father—well, almost—and that she only adores an image and has no knowledge of the man himself, but it would do no good and only distress her. She thinks it's a sacred secret from all, I've no doubt. The sooner she goes to Canada and falls in love with some husky male of her own weight, the better."

"I'll do what I can. I shan't tell him about the attaché case. It seems indecent, somehow, to expose people's dreams. A hint will be enough to Darrel. And in any case, I know he'll be in favour of this Canadian venture. He's all for young people seeing the world."

"Good. The attaché case is our secret then. Now, shall we dance a nice smoochy encore together and see if we can rouse Darrel's feathers? He's looking too triumphant by

half."

We danced a smoochy encore together, with Nick crooning in my ear, "There's something about the way she moves."

"He's studying us with one of those broody looks that means business," he whispered mischievously a few minutes later. "Any moment now he's going to signal to you, and I wish I could think you wouldn't go to him like a homing pigeon."

"Stop talking nonsense, Nick. You're such a good dancer that I like to concentrate and not chatter."

But he gave me a wicked smile and winked when Darrel claimed me for the next dance.

"Stars in your eyes. You're enjoying yourself," said Darrel.

"Our first house-warming. And it really feels warm."

He smiled and drew me close, and we circled the room to a slow, languorous number, and I don't think there would have been room for a sixpence between us. Darrel could be as smoochy as Nick if he chose.

It was Tonie who made the opportunity I was seeking to be alone with her, for she came up to me with a comical air of dismay and said,

"Some vital elastic's given way. Can I borrow a safety pin?"

I led her upstairs to my bedroom and found her what she wanted. While she made all secure, I powdered my nose. Tonie drifted over to the mirror and pinned her hair back. She was wearing a turquoise blue dress which suited her brilliant colouring, but her eyes looked shadowed and her wide smile was not as ready as it used to be.

"I wish my hair was smooth and shining like yours. How do you manage to get it to look like a ballerina's, and what's

more, stay looking like it? My mop's hopeless. I can't do anything but restrain it."

In fact, it was beautiful hair. Thick and rippling with life, a vibrant red-gold that made my toffee colour seem tame. I told her so.

"That may be, but I just can't handle it," she said, sitting on the bed as though tired. "I'll have it cut short, I think."

"No, don't. Let a really good hairdresser shape it and make it easier to manage. It's grand to see you again, Tonie. I'm sorry it's been so long, but it took nearly two months to get the alterations done to the house and then we had the decorators in."

"It looks lovely. I like the white walls and the rich colours and all the flowers. It's like you, somehow. Warm and friendly."

"When I telephoned and left a message a few weeks ago, you didn't ring back."

"No. I . . . Well, as a matter of fact, I felt a bit awkward. About my blunder over you and Nick. I thought Darrel and you might feel . . . Well, you know."

"I don't. You tell me."

"Well, it could have made trouble. Between you and Darrel. I didn't know there was anything like that between you. At least, I don't think I knew," she added, putting her head between her hands and studying the carpet.

But she had known, or half known, I thought, suddenly seeing what was bothering her. With the sensitive antennae of a person in love, she had half sensed something between Darrel and me in Ireland. And it could have made trouble, although as things had turned out, it had perhaps helped in forcing me to make the first move back to Darrel. And my heart ached for Antonia just then. She was unhappy and felt guilty and had nobody to confide in. And I had so much.

"No need to worry," I said cheerfully. "No need at all."

"You see, I told Darrel when I'd really not much to go on. And I was so glad when I seemed to get confirmation of what I so much wanted to believe. That's why I blurted it all out. I was so pleased, and relieved."

"You don't have to tell me all this now, Tonie," I said gently. "No harm was done. Anyone can make that sort of mistake."

"Perhaps. But I'm trying to be honest with myself and dig out the true motives. You've always been so kind to me. A good friend. If I thought . . ."

"My dear, you're worrying quite unnecessarily about this. And if we all started digging down into our motives, we'd be in a constant state of shock. It was no crime for you to want me to marry Nick. And when we want something, we can always persuade ourselves that the evidence points that way. So forget it. Darrel and I have quite forgotten it, I assure you. And now what's this about your going to Canada? Nick mentioned it just now. It sounds exciting. And just your kind of life."

"Yes. I suppose so. I like Karen. I think I should fit in there, but . . . I haven't made up my mind yet. What's that new building going up behind the Grange?"

"New research laboratories."

"The Grange is being extended, isn't it?"

"Yes. For a better canteen."

"I was going to ask Darrel to show me round, but it's dark now."

I felt suddenly helpless. What could I say? I kept remembering those pathetic bits and pieces in that attaché case. I remembered Darrel giving her the handkerchief when she had grazed her arm against the rough stone of a bridge trying to save herself from falling off a rock into the stream, and it

would not stop bleeding.

"Well, there will be other opportunities. If you go to Canada, you must write and tell us all about it. I'd love to go myself one day. Darrel's been to British Columbia, you know. He went to some conference or other in Ontario and took the opportunity to see more of the country afterwards. Come and talk to him about it. I know he'll be interested."

Darrel looked out some photographs he'd taken in Canada and I left him and Antonia in a huddle over them while I made a final pot of tea for the party. Nick drifted out to the kitchen and perched himself on the table.

"So you and Darrel are off to Ireland on Monday. Lucky devils. Where are you staying?"

"In the Wicklow Mountains the first week, because that's a part of Ireland Darrel says I ought to see, and then we're spending ten days in Killarney."

"That was a good summer we had together. I shan't ever forget it."

"Nor I. Nor will Tonie, I'm afraid."

"Once she's in Canada, it will dim. I think Darrel's sold it to her. As I looked over his shoulder at the photographs he was saying, 'Of course you'll go, Tonie. You're a girl of enterprise.' And then he went on to something about a man called Vic Laker who ran a nature reserve out there and who'd be delighted to show her over it. She won't dare to turn it down now that His Majesty has spoken."

And Nick was right. She told me when she was putting on her coat.

"Darrel's given me a note of introduction to a friend in British Columbia. A naturalist with a kind of private zoo. Not far from Karen's home. I must say the country looks marvellous. And it will be better than working in an office, anyway. Perhaps I'll find out what I really want to do there.

It just seems a long way from home and friends, though."

Nick and Antonia were the last to go, and as we stood in the porch to see them off, she said goodbye and thanked us with a bright smile and a cheerful voice, but as she turned to get in the car I thought I caught the glisten of tears in her eyes. She would have left for Canada by the time we returned from Ireland.

"A good party," observed Darrel as he helped me clear the cups and glasses into the kitchen.

"Yes. I think they all enjoyed themselves. I hope Tonie will sort herself out in Canada. She seems a bit lost."

"Of course she will. She's got youth, health, vitality, everything on her side. She'll have a splendid time out there, once she's taken the plunge."

But I was still thinking about her as I brushed my hair in front of the bedroom mirror. Whatever happened in Canada, I had a feeling that to Tonie, nothing would compare with that golden summer we had shared in Ireland.

Darrel came in from the bathroom and stood behind me, eyeing my reflection with a thoughtful air.

"Are you still worrying about young Tonie?"

"Not worrying. But growing up is a very painful process, and I can feel for her. I should know. My own growing up was a very protracted business."

"You had a poorer start than Tonie. She'll be all right."

"I've been lucky," I said, leaning my head against him.

"Tired?"

"No," I said firmly, and he smiled as he lifted my hair and kissed the nape of my neck, and set my blood racing.

"Good. Nor am I," he observed, and picked me up and carried me to bed.

* * *

And so, a year almost to the day after my first journey to Ireland, I found myself on the boat to Rosslare again, but this time with my husband. As we leaned on the rail and watched the gulls wheeling against a blue sky and felt the boat lift and fall to a sparkling, rather choppy sea, I could not help thinking back, seeing the ghosts of an elegant young man leaning on the rail and a girl with a laughing face and red-gold hair. And the ghost of myself, tormented by the loss of Adrian and the questions which I could not answer, uncertain, unhappy. I had come a long way from that ghost, and my heart was brimming over with thankfulness and love for the man who had changed my world. I put my hand over his, and I think he understood something of what I was feeling for he said gently,

"Set fair?"

"Fair and steady. And I wouldn't change places with anybody else in the world."

"Nor I," he replied, and put his arm round me to hold me firm as the boat pitched steeply down the trough of a wave, then lifted to send a rainbow shower of spray over the bows. Ahead, I could just see the blurred outline of the Irish coast.

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When Jean decided to go to Ireland, to the scene of the accident, to discover the truth for herself, she was surprised when her trustee, Darrel Brynton, insisted on accompanying her. Surprised - and disturbed. For Darrel, exasperating and laconic as he was, was physically more attractive to her than any man had been before - even Adrian himself.

But Jean was to find that she still had a great deal of growing up to do - as the golden summer months slowly turned to dark December . . .

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